
'A Man Needs Meat': Food And Gender
In The Fiction Of Barbara Pym

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Abstract

This thesis examines Barbara Pym's treatment of a critically-documented theme, food, as it intersects with gender within her *oeuvre*. By mapping the subversive quality that her fiction achieves through the ironic exposition of cultural myths relating to food and its gender implications, it offers an alternative critical perspective on Pym, formulated in opposition to the traditionalist hegemony that seeks to 'protect' her from feminists.

The study begins by exploring the historical and material conditions of Pym's rejection and 're-discovery', and the invention of her reputation by her literary guardians, in order to identify the subtleties of Pym's political sensibility and to provide a feminist-cultural theoretical reading of it. As Pym's life had an immediate and constitutive effect on the form and content of her work, Chapter 2 examines archival material which forms the basis of a psycho-sexual reading of her personal relationship to food, particularly as it symbolises or substitutes for desire. Chapters 3 and 4 provide close readings of her novels, examining the relationship of Pym's women and men to food, revealing how the dialogue between women and food figures as a metonym of desire, and is often the source of abjection, while for men food acts as both sexual metaphor and a metonymic site of power. These chapters are developed through a feminist socio-anthropological filter, offering an overview of foodway rules as they encode gender conventions and their supporting mythologies. This informs an analysis of Pym's fiction that considers how she chronicles English middle-class 'tribal customs' contemporary with her fifty years of writing, based upon the evidence of her familiarity with anthropological theory and technique.

The inquiry into the thematic importance of food in Pym's fiction reveals how she ironises the cultural myths which mark gender difference and support a gender hierarchy. Since it engages with contemporary critical debate about and within feminist literary theory and gender studies, it offers both a much-needed re-evaluation of Pym's texts and a critical revision of what does and should comprise a feminist canon.

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is my own unaided work.

Christopher Macdonell Shields

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There is no love sincerer than the love of food

George Bernard Shaw

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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AQ</i>	<i>An Academic Question</i> , [1986] London: Grafton, 1987
<i>CH</i>	<i>Crampton Hodnet</i> , [1985] London: Grafton, 1986
<i>CS</i>	<i>Civil to Strangers and Other Writings</i> , [1987] London: Grafton, 1990
<i>EW</i>	<i>Excellent Women</i> , [1952] Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980
<i>FGL</i>	<i>A Few Green Leaves</i> , [1980] London: Grafton, 1981
<i>GB</i>	<i>A Glass of Blessings</i> , [1958] London: Pan, 1994
<i>JP</i>	<i>Jane and Prudence</i> , [1953] London: Pan, 1993
<i>LA</i>	<i>Less Than Angels</i> , [1955] London: Pan, 1993
<i>NFRL</i>	<i>No Fond Return of Love</i> , London: Jonathan Cape, 1961
<i>QA</i>	<i>Quartet in Autumn</i> , [1977] London: Grafton, 1980
<i>SDD</i>	<i>The Sweet Dove Died</i> , [1978] London: Grafton, 1980
<i>STG</i>	<i>Some Tame Gazelle</i> , [1950] London: Panther, 1981
<i>UA</i>	<i>An Unsuitable Attachment</i> , [1982] London: Panther, 1983
<i>VPE</i>	<i>A Very Private Eye: An Autobiography in Letters and Diaries</i> , ed. Hazel Holt and Hilary Pym. London: Grafton, 1985

All works by Barbara Pym.

Introduction: Making a Feast of Barbara Pym's Literary Legacy

Anyone with even the slightest knowledge of the life of Barbara Pym will no doubt recognise the story of her unusual writing career which has, in many ways, gained her more notoriety than her novels. A study of Pym, however, which forfeits the opportunity to recount this familiar narrative risks losing the advantage provided by its characteristic cue of identification, while glossing an issue that, arguably, may be linked to those conditions of life which made Pym a writer of note, one worthy of the scholarly and popular attention she receives today. Pym's tale of modest appeal followed by total anonymity followed by enormous popularity offers a natural point of departure for an examination not only of key themes and patterns in her fiction, and issues surrounding her reputation and personal politics, but even more importantly, to an investigation into the very politics *of* reputation and the question of inclusion in a literary canon.

To begin: Pym began writing seriously in the 1930s after having completed a degree in English Literature at Oxford University, and Jonathan Cape entertained the notion of publishing her first novel, *Some Tame Gazelle* -- originally a "serial letter" featuring comic projections of the late-middle-aged lives of Pym and her Oxford friends -- as early as 1936.¹ But it was not until the Second World War ended, however, that Cape finally accepted a much-revised version of this first novel for

¹ Robert Liddell describes the original manuscript version of the novel as "hardly [...] a novel -- it was more like a serial letter". *A Mind at Ease: Barbara Pym and her Novels* (London: Peter Owen, 1989), 20.

publication. *Some Tame Gazelle* marks the beginning of what proved to be a modestly fruitful decade for Pym in terms of artistic output, critical reception, and sales²; and even then, Pym's food-filled novel inspired the critics' use of culinary metaphors, leading one reviewer to call the book "enchanted [...] but no more to be described than a delicious taste or smell".³

Eager to forgive Cape the yawning fourteen-year gap which separated their initial interest in her manuscript from their eventual acceptance of it, Pym quietly established her position on their authors' list with measured literary production throughout the 1950s. *Some Tame Gazelle* (1950) was followed by *Excellent Women* (1952), *Jane and Prudence* (1953), *Less Than Angels* (1955), *A Glass of Blessings* (1958), and *No Fond Return of Love* (1961). During this time her novels were well received by critics and reviewers, and she retained a minority but faithful readership. However, in 1963 Jonathan Cape -- having already proven "falsely than false Cressid"⁴ -- rejected the manuscript for what would have been her seventh novel, *An Unsuitable Attachment*, unceremoniously dropping Pym from its list. Wren Howard, assigned the task of informing Pym of Cape's decision, wrote to her citing the difficulties in "present conditions" of trying to "sell a sufficient number of copies to cover costs, let alone make any profit".⁵ With shaken confidence, Pym conveyed to Philip Larkin her fear that "this novel [was] much worse than [her] others" (VPE: 301).

² Pym records in her diary her book sales up to December 1958: GB, 3 071; LA, 3 569; JP, 5 052; EW, 6 577; STG, 3 544. MS PYM 125, folio 75 recto.

³ Elizabeth Jenkins, "New Novels", *The Guardian* 26 May 1950: 19.

⁴ Liddell, *A Mind at Ease*, 15. Liddell actually uses the phrase in conjunction with Cape's rejection of STG, after they had shown an interest in the novel in 1936, pending alterations.

Pym's fears were partly justified; Larkin cites the book's self-indulgence while conceding that its key relationship, the eponymous 'unsuitable attachment', "is not sufficiently central to the story and not fully 'done'".⁶ However, both gradually came to understand the implications of a more unsavoury reality, that Pym's type of novel, which chronicled the subtle poignancies, commonplace hopes, and prosaic desires of 'an ordinary mind on an ordinary day', had become unfashionable.⁷ Patrick Swinden, in describing the decline of what he detects was a neo-Victorian/Edwardian tradition which had found its way into the English novel of the 1950s and '60s -- citing Pym's *Excellent Women* as the tradition's iconic text -- sees the ebb of this type of novel as a result of "a sort of imaginative anaemia and provincialism".⁸ A.T. Tolley is somewhat more generous, claiming that Pym's "modest, sensitive -- if polite -- celebration of English middle-class life and its decencies was out of tune with more strident tastes in fiction prevailing in the 'sixties".⁹ Pym directed some resentment toward the 'hip'

⁵ Hazel Holt, *A Lot to Ask: A Life of Barbara Pym* (London: Abacus, 1990), 196.

⁶ Philip Larkin, "Foreword", *An Unsuitable Attachment* (London: Panther, 1982), 8.

⁷ Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction", *The Common Reader: First Series* (London: Hogarth Press, 1925), 189.

⁸ Patrick Swinden, *The English Novel of History and Society 1940-1980* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 1. After denigrating *EW* for its narrow scope, Swinden goes on to malign Pym's *roman à clef*, *Quartet in Autumn*, grossly exaggerating the importance of a minor plot sequence: "Pym makes the whole story revolve around the efforts of one elderly lady to return a used milk bottle to another elderly lady. Is this another of those 'little useless longings' that make up most of our lives, and to which we are therefore expected to pay the kind of attention not willingly spent on Grass' Neo-Nazis or Solzhenitsyn's labour camps?", 1-2. Since his prejudice is somewhat veiled here, it is difficult to know whether Swinden heaps more scorn on the subjects of Pym's novels or the readership. Although he refrains from using such terms, Swinden's difficulty with the English novel of the immediate pre- and post-war years seems to be that it had become 'effeminised'; it had yet to display the "wider and deeper perception [...] of the competition from Europe and America", 3.

⁹ A.T. Tolley, *My Proper Ground: A Study of the Work of Philip Larkin and*

purveyors of these modern tastes, as she was piqued by Cape's interest in "Ian Fleming and Len Deighton and all the Americans they publish" (VPE: 310), people she sometimes referred to in abbreviation as those "men and Americans" (VPE: 297).

Pym's diary entries from this period also signal her awareness of, and unease with, the extremes of her changing world. She marks her familiarity with the Profumo scandal by considering offering her writing services to Dr Stephen Ward, revealing her characteristic sense of the ironic (VPE: 303). And she depressively details how her own disappointments are set against the backdrop of the systemic degeneration of the social fabric of a new decade -- the 'Swinging Sixties' -- in which the year 1963 comes to represent her 'annus horribilis':

1963 so far. A year of violence, death and blows.
The bad Winter up to the end of February without a break.
Death of Hugh Gaitskell.
Two burglaries.
My typewriter stolen.
My novel rejected by Cape.
Dr Beeching's plan for sweeping away of railways and stations.
Reading *The Naked Lunch*.
The Bishop of Woolwich's book *Honest to God*.
My novel rejected by Heath.
Tropic of Cancer by Henry Miller (60,000? copies sold on 1st day of publication).
Daniel George's stroke (VPE: 300)

The popularity and notoriety of Burroughs' *The Naked Lunch* and Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* offers a most vivid illustration of the inclinations of publishers and the reading public at this time. By comparison, the key feature of the novel which was to prove Pym's downfall, the 'unsuitable attachment', seems unnecessarily overwrought and hardly worth the excitement it was meant to engender among her readers, as it merely

documents the relationship between a middle-class woman and a slightly younger working-class man. The novel's romantic development is otherwise orthodox in that John Challow courts Ianthe Broome and eventually marries her; there is not even a whiff of the impropriety (or titillation) of pre-marital sex. So while Pym's treatment of unmarried co-habitation (*LA*, 1955) and homosexuality (*GB*, 1958) from only a few years before may have then seemed daring, if not exactly radical, by 1963 her precious, class-conscious conceits proved unable to compete with the drug-addled prose of Burroughs, Miller, and others, whose popular work -- like the revolutionary 'pop' music of the era -- translated sexual desire into an artistic form where the sexual element was rarely suppressed and often shockingly explicit.

A sympathetic Larkin offered guidance and support during this difficult period as Pym tried to make sense of her new status as an unpublished writer when, like most writers, she had used her art to help give order to her world. Neither Larkin nor Pym, however, could have charted the course of her setback or predicted how long her literary voice would remain muted. Although separated by gender and the span of half a generation (Pym was nine years older than Larkin), they shared an ethos based on a celebration of the traditional which bordered on the neophobic.¹⁰ Larkin's poem, "Annus Mirabilis", offers a fitting counterpoint to Pym's 'annus horribilis' as it echoes the sentiments she offers in her diary, revealing an inability (or unwillingness) to adapt

¹⁰ Larkin wrote in a letter to Pym in arranging their first meeting, "I'm sure that we shall recognise each other by progressive elimination, i.e. eliminating all the progressives". Anthony Thwaite, ed. *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940-1985* (London: Faber, 1992), 523.

to the contemporary scene, a condition which may arise from disingenuousness on

Larkin's part but was clearly a difficulty for a cultured and morally-conservative Pym:

Sexual intercourse began
In nineteen sixty-three
(Which was rather too late for me) --
Between the end of the *Chatterley* ban
And the Beatles' first LP¹¹

Though Pym kept writing throughout the 1960s and '70s, on the whole she resisted any temptation to alter her style or shift her literary focus in order to accommodate the needs of publishers and tastes of readers at this time.¹² Her "achievement", Tolley concludes, "is associated with an incapacity to give up being herself or to modify her idiom in deference to any sense of what literature ought to be".¹³ In a working notebook entry dated 10 November 1971, based on a typical Pymian observation, she laments the poor reception of her unique and idiosyncratic take on life: "Mr C in the library -- he is having his lunch, eating a sandwich with a knife and fork, a glass of milk near at hand. Oh, why can't I write about things like this anymore -- why is this kind of thing no longer acceptable?"¹⁴

Pym's period of "enforced silence", as Larkin phrases it, remained unbroken for fourteen years.¹⁵ Her publishing history is analogous to that of another woman writer, Jean Rhys, whose authorial voice was silent for an extended period; and, like

¹¹ Philip Larkin, "Annus Mirabilis", *High Windows* (London: Faber, 1974), 34.

¹² Pym did, in fact, try to write a 'new' kind of novel by imitating the style of a successful woman writer, Margaret Drabble, but she abandoned the effort (*VPE*: 368). This novel was later prepared for publication by Hazel Holt and finally published as *An Academic Question* (1986).

¹³ Tolley, 158.

¹⁴ MS PYM 69, folio 7 recto-verso.

¹⁵ Larkin, "Foreword", *An Unsuitable Attachment*, 7.

Rhys, many of Pym's devotees erroneously believed that it was an early death which had brought her writing career to a halt.¹⁶ Yet, in 1977, after having been considered 'dead' to the world for so long, both Larkin and Lord David Cecil -- the two men now recognised as Pym's champions -- facilitated her rebirth into the literary scene. In a *Times Literary Supplement* symposium in January of that year, they named her as the century's most underrated writer; she was the only living writer to be named twice. The resultant exposure, coupled with the fact that literary tastes again favoured the quaintness of Pym's style and thematic offerings (this time, through a sense of nostalgia), changed the course of Pym's life almost overnight, leading some critics to label Pym's 'a Cinderella story'. Macmillan agreed to publish a novel she had been working on since the early 1970s, *Quartet in Autumn* (1977), another that she had started in the early 1960s, *The Sweet Dove Died* (1978), as well as posthumously publishing her last novel, *A Few Green Leaves* (1980). The previously-rejected *An Unsuitable Attachment* was finally published in 1982; *Crampton Hodnet*, written and rejected by Pym herself in the late 1930s, was published in 1985; and this was quickly followed by *An Academic Question* (1986) and a collection of partly-completed novels, along with some short fiction, published as *Civil to Strangers and Other Writings* (1987). Jonathan Cape also sought to benefit from Pym's new-found fame by re-issuing the six novels for which they held copyright. The growing popularity of Pym's work, particularly in the United States, has certainly eclipsed any of the expectations Pym might have entertained regarding her own hopes for success

¹⁶ It is apparent that even after the *TLS* survey was released some people failed to note that Pym was the only *living* writer to be named twice. When journalist Caroline Moorehead was researching her article for *The Times* (14 September 1977), her contact at Cape "was at first even doubtful whether [Pym] was still alive".

following the *TLS* poll; as one American reviewer trumpeted in response to the latest posthumous release, "[t]oday something like Pym-mania has struck the literary world".¹⁷

There is little doubt that Larkin's and Cecil's endorsements initiated this so-called 'Pym-mania', and Pym's adherents are in universal accordance in showing a debt of gratitude to these two for the rescue of their literary heroine from the wilderness of obscurity.¹⁸ The American editor of a collection of essays on Pym, Janice Rossen, for example, dedicates her volume to both men.¹⁹ Pym, too, was unabashedly grateful and clearly credited the pair with her so-called 're-discovery'. She wrote to Larkin, "I still wonder if any of this [success] would have happened if it hadn't been for you and Lord D. And the dear *TLS*!" (*VPE*: 464). Later, in a short essay she prepared for radio broadcast entitled "Finding a Voice", she confessed that

¹⁷ Anna Shapiro, *Saturday Review* 1983, cited in Robert Graham, "Cumbered with Much Serving: Barbara Pym's 'Excellent Women'", *Mosaic* 17(2) Spring 1984: 143.

¹⁸ Merritt Moseley offers a voice of dissension: "To say that the Barbara Pym revival was caused by Lord David Cecil and Philip Larkin is obviously too simple; though their endorsement does explain the surprised articles on Pym and the 1977 BBC film showing her and Lord David drinking tea at her Oxfordshire cottage, it can't, after all, explain much more. Few people will read a Barbara Pym novel because Lord David Cecil and Philip Larkin, two old-fashioned readers who are hardly taste-makers for the masses, say they should -- much less read more than one book", "A Few Words About Barbara Pym", *The Sewanee Review* 98(1) January-March 1990: 78. While Moseley is right to deny that Larkin and Cecil are 'taste-makers for the masses' (although Larkin's support did effect Pym's shortlist nomination for the 1977 Booker Prize), he underestimates the power of the media interest in Pym in the aftermath of the *TLS* poll. Key here is the synchronicity of Larkin's and Cecil's endorsements which sparked the media interest, and, in turn, led to her re-publication in Britain and subsequent popularity in America.

¹⁹ Janice Rossen, ed. *Independent Women: The Function of Gender in the Novels of Barbara Pym* (Sussex and New York: Harvester and St Martin's, 1988).

[i]t was marvellously encouraging to be brought back from the wilderness. But it was disquieting too. I wonder how many other novelists have suddenly been told their work is not fashionable or saleable any more, and never been lucky enough to have the generous praise I had from the right people in the right place. (CS: 413)

It is probable that had Larkin, and to a lesser extent, Cecil, not actively sought to achieve Pym's re-emergence as a published writer she would have continued to lie buried in the literary margins, occupying her place among a collective of muted female voices. Crucially, she was courted by both, sought out, in a manner of speaking, having received 'fanmail' from them; Larkin, in particular, offered to pen an admiring review in conjunction with the publication of her next novel (the ill-fated *An Unsuitable Attachment*).²⁰ Their dogged loyalty to Pym's art helped to popularise her fiction and facilitate the cult of personality many are keen to associate with her today. But one must consider the implications of Pym's initial rejection and lengthy silence in order to understand how she was victimised by a patriarchally-controlled institution of literary production, one which devalued a middle-brow woman writer whose texts centre, ironically enough, the sort of characters -- unattractive, middle-aged, and/or unmarried women -- conventionally marginal to contemporary literature. And although it is generally agreed that Larkin's and Cecil's intervention signalled a new lease of life for her, the success of their involvement with Pym's cause must also be viewed with ambivalence, no matter how unfashionable such a position is within the

²⁰ Cecil wrote to Pym on 24 November 1953, "[f]orgive a total stranger writing to tell you how much he enjoys your books [...] You have so much sense of reality and sense of comedy, and the people in your books are living and credible and likeable. I find this rare in modern fiction. Please do not answer this" (PYM MS 147, folio 148). Larkin wrote a few years later, 16 January 1961, to say that his review "would, of course, be written from the standpoint of one who much enjoys [her novels]". Thwaite, 323.

sphere of traditional Pym scholarship. To be silenced by the men at Cape because she was not writing trendy best-sellers -- as produced by 'men and Americans' -- only to 'find her voice' once again through empowerment by proprietary male traditionalists like Larkin and Cecil signifies little more than a semantic shift in the terms and conditions of the masculine bias which regulated Pym's artistic expression.²¹

It could be argued that the re-construction of Pym as the darling of the traditionalist, and mainly right-wing, junta of male critics headed by Larkin and backed by Cecil, A.L. Rowse, Robert Liddell, and others, locked her within a particular critical register which effectively curtailed interest from alternative -- specifically feminist -- quarters. Certainly, on both a personal and professional level Larkin and Pym had much in common, which might partly explain his interest in her, and over the course of time they came to realise their affinity. Annette Weld supplies the more obvious points for comparison:

Neither hailed from an aristocratic or literary family, nor was a part of the contemporary social or literary scene. Neither married and each lived a quiet middle-class life supporting himself [sic] at what Larkin dubbed 'toad work', Pym among the anthropologists and he as librarian at Hull University. Both, eschewing current literary trends, wrote knowingly of loneliness, aging, and isolation with voices grounded in unadorned language and practical common sense.²²

Larkin admired Pym for what he viewed as her novels' humanist projection of "an unrivalled picture of a small section of middle-class post-war England", as well as for

²¹ For example, it is interesting to note that Larkin used his influence to gain some degree of editorial control over Pym's work once she became published again in 1977. It is apparent, though, that this control slipped somewhat during the preparation for publication of Pym's last novel, *A Few Green Leaves*; Larkin criticised the novel when it was posthumously released, decrying Pym's return to the familiarity of the anthropologists and the cosiness of the early novels (see Thwaite, 625).

²² Annette Weld, *Barbara Pym and the Novel of Manners* (London: Macmillan, 1992), 170.

her "unique eye and ear for the small poignancies and comedies of everyday life".²³ His own allegiance to the fictional ethos of a 'little England' meant that his devotion to Pym takes on a slightly narcissistic tone in that his praise of her appears self-reflexive. Larkin's biographer, Andrew Motion, states that "it's clear from everything Larkin said about Pym that he thought her excellences were his own: a modest manner embracing larger issues; infinite riches in a little room".²⁴ Motion notes, too, that the "facets of his personality" Larkin revealed to Pym in their epistolary relationship "are reactionary, little-Englandish, self-deprecating -- and she responded in kind".²⁵

As for Cecil, he hyperbolised about Pym's novels, declaring them "unpretentious, subtle, accomplished", and "the finest examples of high comedy to have appeared in England during the past seventy-five years".²⁶ No doubt he was also attracted by the novels' Christianity, as Cecil's dogmatism is often seen to entwine with his critical appraisals.²⁷ But clearly Cecil was drawn by the antiquated, almost anachronistic quality of Pym's fiction. It is not difficult to classify Pym's work in this way for, as a twenty-one-year old and something of a 'young fogey', Pym began writing the novel that would eventually become *Some Tame Gazelle*, in which she antedates her birth by some twenty-five years in order to fictionalise her life as a 'fiftysomething' spinster living in 1935; it was not until Cape rejected her in 1963 that

²³ Philip Larkin, "Reputations Revisited", *The Times Literary Supplement* 21 January 1977: 66.

²⁴ Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (London: Faber, 1993), 308.

²⁵ Motion, 309.

²⁶ Lord David Cecil, "Reputations Revisited", *The Times Literary Supplement* 21 January 1977 67.

²⁷ See, for example, W.W. Robson, "Preface", *Essays and Poems Presented to Lord David Cecil* (London: Constable, 1970), viii.

Pym actually turned fifty, having aged into her old-fangled, comic-realist style. As a critic of *belles lettres* who might be described as a 'fogey' himself, Cecil "held steadily before us an old-fashioned ideal" that was "at once aesthetic and moral", and reached its apogee, in his opinion, in Pym's first six novels, particularly *Excellent Women* and *A Glass of Blessings*.²⁸ Merritt Moseley claims that the old-fashioned tone or retrogressive nature of Pym's fiction figures her within the nostalgic scheme of "young Fogies", people who also indulge in "braces and bowlers and tea-dancing at the Ritz", but clearly Pym's appeal, as prescribed by the traditionalists, rests with 'fogies' both young and old.²⁹

So Pym's fiction can be seen as emblematic of certain features, manifest in both life and art, whose preservation inspired the crusades of Larkin and Cecil. In support of their 're-discovery', these critics felt qualified to 'colonise' Pym's authorial voice because it was reflective of their own discursive voices. The style in which Pym's voice was structured and the stuff with which she concerned herself was *their* manner, *their* matter. Motion again supports this contention, suggesting that Larkin offered his loyalty to Pym during the years of silence because "he did not regard her as competition -- to some extent he [backed her] because in praising her he was defining his own qualities".³⁰ Therefore, though Pym was once silenced by the men at Cape, the irony remains that another group of men gave her voice back, a voice Larkin and Cecil ceded to her through the empowering (and overpowering)

²⁸ Robson, viii.

²⁹ Moseley, 83.

³⁰ Motion, 462.

identification of their voices with hers. And having been courted by them and popularised through their agency, few of her adherents would deny 'how blest' we are 'in this discovering' of Pym -- as though she were some sort of 'new-found-land' -- but such male-defined recognition within the literary world brought with it an intense traditionalist, and masculinist, critical gaze that left little space for feminist reassessments of Pym and her fiction.

The prickly issue of the construction and promotion of Pym's personal and literary reputation, begun under the aegis of Larkin's and Cecil's support, is even more evident in the literary guardianship furnished by various of Pym's friends. While Pym did cultivate a genuine friendship with Larkin especially, born out of his personal and critical involvement with her work, it is the over-protectiveness of some of her longest-standing friends that has most effectively imprisoned Pym within a traditional critical zeitgeist. These friends, who benefit from years of personal knowledge of Pym and long-term exposure to the development of her art, have sought to regulate both her public image and the terms of her 're-discovery', and, by extension, the application of contemporary critical/theoretical approaches to her work. Robert Liddell, for example, a friend of Pym's from her Oxford days and a frequent editor of her work before, during, and after her periods of publication, prepared a book-length critical review of her novels "in order to present her as a worthwhile author", thereby limiting himself "to the work on which [he felt] sure her reputation must rest" -- those works he dubs Pym's 'canon', namely the first six novels.³¹ Liddell appears determined

³¹ Liddell, *A Mind at Ease*, 7.

to deny to Pym's work any presence of a subtext which might invite contemporary critical engagement, and laments the circulation of scholarly misconceptions -- particularly those emanating from the "transatlantic critics" -- cautioning that "the old adage 'always verify your references' must always be in the minds of those who read (or write) books about Barbara Pym -- the mistakes and misunderstandings are as rife as if she were a writer of a distant age".³² In an effort to minimise these mistakes while ensuring that the critical inquiry into her fiction limit itself to an impressionistic paradigm that considers only surtextual detail, Liddell flatly states that

[i]t will be impossible for thesis-mongers -- and she has already attracted their notice -- to write about [Pym's] social or political views for, unfashionably, she had none. In February 1934 she helped to feed the Hunger Marchers in Oxford, and in September of the same year she was 'very impressed by Hitler'.³³

So while, on the one hand, Liddell praises the 'canon' as "delightful comedy set in closely defined environments, which allow for delicate and minute observation"³⁴, his tendency is to devalue Pym's work by citing its unreconstructed simplicity in opposition to textual evidence to the contrary: "I do not know what a critic [i.e. Liddell himself] would find to say about [her novels] if others had not been in the field before him, and had made errors that needed correction -- there would be little to do except tell the stories of the novels".³⁵

³² Liddell, *A Mind at Ease*, 58.

³³ Robert Liddell, "Two Friends: Barbara Pym and Ivy Compton-Burnett", *London Magazine* n.s. 24(5-6) August/September 1984: 63.

³⁴ Robert Liddell, "A Success Story", *The Life and Work of Barbara Pym*, ed Dale Salwak (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987), 180.

³⁵ Liddell, *A Mind at Ease*, 8. At the 1993 Barbara Pym Literary Weekend, held at St Hilda's College, Oxford, Robert Smith stated in his talk that Liddell was, in fact, somewhat envious of Pym's success, and this coloured his view of the popular and critical reception of her novels; as a novelist in his own right, Liddell never enjoyed the same degree of fame. Hazel Holt added that she always felt Liddell's devaluation of Pym's writing stemmed from his preference for the talents of two other women writers (also his close friends): Ivy Compton-Burnett and Elizabeth Taylor.

Long-time friend, editor, 'literary executrix', and Pym biographer, Hazel Holt, whose tireless efforts in providing Pym's popular readership with increased access to material is most commendable, also displays obstructive tendencies within the critical/theoretical forum. By invoking the author's name while falling back on the strategic advantage of personal knowledge of Pym's feelings on sensitive issues, Holt can appear to diminish the work of Pym scholars -- and through the power of reference to Larkin's 'biographer', the 'transatlantic' ones in particular. Holt writes:

In the years since [Pym's] death her readership has grown immensely and her novels and her life have become the subject of much learned comment, which would have amused and, sometimes, appalled her -- she was always scornful of the Jake Balokowskys of the academic world.³⁶

Much of the interest in Pym's life, in particular, though, has been provided by Holt herself through the publication of selections from Pym's personal writing (edited by Holt with Pym's sister, Hilary) and a biography. Comparison with manuscript material reveals that Holt sanitised some of the details present in Pym's diaries and notebooks -- particularly details concerning her sexual or political experience -- although Holt does attempt to compensate for this tendency by enlarging on these themes somewhat in the biography. But clearly, Holt's intention is to offer the personal details Pym's readership craves without jeopardising her reputation as an 'Excellent Woman', one very like her best-loved heroines.³⁷ Such efforts are not universally well received; Hilary Spurling notes that "[t]he message of [Holt's] scrappy, repetitive, often humourless, uneventful and ill-edited book [*A Very Private Eye*] seems to be that you

³⁶ Holt, *A Lot to Ask*, xi.

³⁷ The 'Excellent Woman' is a 'splendid' character, morally-upright, emotionally-restrained, effective in a crisis; she seems proverbially feminine in her deference to others, in the way she anticipates and meets others' needs, and yet through service to others sometimes seems 'hardly a woman at all', as Dulcie Mainwaring phrases it (*NFRL*: 117).

too -- however tame, unadventurous and drab -- can be a novelist", and goes so far as to call Holt's presentation of Pym "an invention".³⁸ Some readers, too, were appalled by facts Holt could not obscure and inadequately contextualised, in details relating to Pym's political naiveté, compulsive heterosexuality, and obsession with unsuitable men. Penelope Lively attributes this collective recoiling to the fact that Pym's diaries revealed her "*persona* was very different from that projected on her by her readers".³⁹

Most hindering of all, however, is Holt's marked opposition to feminist literary scholarship.⁴⁰ Penelope Lively wrote in 1982 how she was "always surprised that the feminists [had] never claimed Barbara Pym", adding that she suspected, however, that Pym would have rejected the affiliation.⁴¹ The reality is such that Pym never seemed an ideal subject for feminist reclamation because her literary guardians actively sought to protect her from such groups; indeed, Holt once admitted in interview to Annette Weld that she has "fought to keep Barbara out of the hands of the feminists".⁴² Obviously, Holt, like Liddell and the other traditionalists, chooses instead to promote Pym's popularity and accessibility and tries to keep the lid on the political Pandora's box that must inevitably be opened through feminist -- or, indeed, any -- contemporary cultural or post-structural literary theoretical inquiry.⁴³ By pandering to

³⁸ Hilary Spurling, "A Taste of Dust", *The Guardian* (Manchester) 29 July 1984: 22.

³⁹ Penelope Lively, "Pym's Aren't What You Thought They Were", *Books & Bookmen* June 1984: 8-9.

⁴⁰ This monolithic phrase, 'feminist literary scholarship', features here in the way that Holt appears to understand it; in Chapter 1, an examination of Pym's relationship to feminism acknowledges how diverse, disparate, and often conflicting ideological positions share a feminist byline.

⁴¹ Penelope Lively, "Recent Fiction", *Encounter* 58 (April) 1982: 76.

⁴² Weld, 204.

standard traditionalist critical assumptions -- that Pym's fiction is "unabashedly romantic", essentially humanist, and rather too conservative to be truly subversive⁴⁴ -- and by concentrating on issues surrounding Pym's class- rather than gender-consciousness, Holt and others cultivate Pym's reputation as a 'lite' writer, chronicling the ordinary lives of insignificant people in 'little England', and therefore deserving of only modest attention from the foreign mob of post-structuralist, post-modernist, post-feminist intellectual interest groups.⁴⁵ And since Holt's design is to ensure that Pym continues to appear unpalatable to feminists, appraisals of her life and work that 'showcase', rather than 'recover', 'analyse', or 'politicise', tend to receive Holt's official stamp of approval. Sanctioned events organised for the edification of Pym's devotees, like a fashion show held at the 1994 Barbara Pym Literary Weekend in celebration of the theme "Pym and Clothing", are therefore guaranteed to keep the feminists at bay.

Despite this opposition, though, and in response to the very qualities that fired Lively's interest in Pym as a subject for feminist reclamation ("of all women novelists no one has dealt so effectively with male aspirations"⁴⁶), some progress has been made

⁴³ Janice Rossen suggests "that Pym suffers mildly in academic circles because she is suspiciously popular with the general reader", "Introduction", *Independent Women*, 1. Rossen does not go so far as to suggest that Holt and others, however, appear more interested in cultivating her popularity among a general readership than in raising her currency in academic circles.

⁴⁴ Michael Cotsell calls Pym's novels "unabashedly romantic", *Barbara Pym* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 4.

⁴⁵ Hilary Pym suggested in interview to Katherine Ackley (25 February 1988) that she thought "some scholars [were] treating her sister with a bit too much gravity: the one dominant characteristic of Barbara's novels [...] is their lightheartedness". Katherine Ackley, *The Novels of Barbara Pym* (New York and London: Garland, 1989), 207fn.

⁴⁶ Lively, "Recent Fiction", 76.

in terms of recovering Pym for a richly diverse feminist critical readership, particularly through the work of various 'transatlantics'.⁴⁷ In concert, then, with the growing recovery of Pym and her fiction which is being undertaken through the application to her work of feminist literary theoretical strategies, this thesis examines her treatment of a much-favoured and critically-documented theme -- food -- as it intersects with gender. In so doing, it reacts to the orthodoxy maintained by the Pym traditionalists. These are represented here, for reasons that will become obvious, through the critical practice of Robert Liddell, who fails to see an association between these two substantives, food and gender, and therefore denies their importance to the formation of Pym's subversive subtext, even denying the presence of a subtext itself.

More specifically, Liddell endeavours to correct what he feels is a misreading by John Halperin⁴⁸ concerning the following passage from *Jane and Prudence*:

Men alone, eating in a rather grand club with noble portals -- and women alone, eating in a small, rather grimy restaurant which did a lunch for three and sixpence, including coffee. While Arthur Grampian was shaking the red pepper on to his smoked salmon, Prudence was having to choose between the shepherd's pie and the stuffed marrow. (*JP*: 44-45)

By choosing to ignore what may be seen as a classic example of Pym's depiction of gender bias, a clear juxtaposition of masculine privilege with feminine disadvantage, Liddell initiates his exercise in critical revisionism. He first notes that Halperin "almost suggest[s] that women do not get enough to eat", before continuing:

⁴⁷ Anne Wyatt-Brown, in particular, in tilling "the unexpected subsoil" of Pym's comedy, offers a psychologised reading of Pym's life and work that fills gaps those somewhat too close to their subject seem loathe to fill. *Barbara Pym: A Critical Biography* (Columbia and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), xii-xiii.

⁴⁸ John Halperin, "Barbara Pym and the War of the Sexes", *The Life and Work of Barbara Pym* ed Dale Salwak, 88-100.

It is true that Arthur Grampian, Prudence Bates's boss, eats smoked salmon 'for dinner at his club' (in fact, it is for luncheon). Prudence, we learn, has to choose between shepherd's pie and stuffed marrow in a restaurant. But we also learn that Geoffrey Manifold, Grampian's assistant, has the same choice before him, in the same restaurant. Age and income, not gender, are here operative, and neither of them [Prudence or Geoffrey] would be eligible for the club. Prudence is not being ill-treated and badly fed by a masculine world.⁴⁹

The main difficulty here lies with his inability to recognise the implications of age and income (where the latter acts as an indicator of social status or class) on cultural perceptions of gender. This is to say that Liddell's reading is one of resistance, causing him to misjudge Pym's use of the trope of food (as it is also applied by the narrator in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*) to represent women as the under-class and thus to highlight a state of female deprivation. The representation of two extremes in the gendered scene of eating involving Prudence and Arthur recalls the comparison made by Woolf's narrator when she asks, "[w]hy did men drink wine and women water? Why was one sex so prosperous and the other so poor?"⁵⁰ Pym's texts replicate this situation where, on the whole, her men eat well, thriving on the food women prepare for them, while her women -- especially her marginalised, self-deprecating heroines -- survive on less, and this is at least partly because society expects them to. Mildred Lathbury, for example, suffers, according to Larkin, "but nobody can see why she shouldn't suffer, like a Victorian cabhorse".⁵¹ But in Pym's world, it is the unfairness inherent in gender hierarchy that catalyses a woman's inner strength and determination in the face of systemic discrimination.

⁴⁹ Liddell, *A Mind at Ease*, 58.

⁵⁰ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* [1929] (London: Grafton, 1977), 30.

⁵¹ Thwaite, 368.

It could be debated whether Prudence, to return to Liddell's representative heroine, is ill-treated and badly fed, but clearly she operates within a world that favours men. The choices Geoffrey and Prudence are faced with may be similar now, but Geoffrey will be presented with life opportunities, analogised through food, that Prudence may be presented with only if she marries advantageously. In spite of Liddell's protestations, then, the manner in which Pym weaves details concerning feminine poverty with those of masculine wealth within the scene of eating suggests a conscious rhetorical ploy meant to highlight issues relating to gender hierarchy. The charm of her novels may be located, however, in the subtlety with which she effects this comparison, often accomplished with the aid of a muted ironic inflection. So while Pym's texts cannot be said to constitute a ground-breaking, transformative feminist agenda, they do offer wry insight into gender mechanisms, revealing how her women are fed differently as the subordinate members of the patriarchy.

Chapter 1 serves up more fodder for this sexual-political debate, providing further sustenance as support for the textual analyses that follow. This first chapter examines more closely the dialogical relationship between food and gender, introducing the notion of the hierarchy of food and its effect on other hierarchical systems like gender. This leads to an exploration of the narrative significance of the phrase 'a man needs meat', which speaks of male desire and female fulfilment. After presenting a critical survey of studies on Pym, with a view to isolating nuances in treatments of food or gender, the chapter then goes on to explore the historical conditions that fostered Pym's writing. It redefines the terms of her nascent political

sensibility and seeks to revise hitherto received notions concerning Pym's literary reputation, thereby contributing to a reassessment of her inclusion within a feminist canon. This exercise is designed to offer a new point of departure in the critical examination of Pym's work -- and a move away from the traditionalist cul-de-sac -- and yet it remains sensitive to a quip of Barbara Everett's, who mentions "the brisk unadmiring inquiry of the academic eager to categorize".⁵² And in the final section of this first chapter, the author of this study stops to consider the delicacy -- and irony -- of his position as a male feminist critic seeking to 'rescue' Pym from a traditionalist-masculinist critical hegemony for the benefit of feminist literary scholarship. While some of Pym's other male critics, including Michael Cotsell, might acknowledge that "any study of Pym must keep in mind that its subject is a woman author, exploring one phase of women's experience" while also admitting that his study "cannot pretend to be a feminist work"⁵³, the author of this study does harbour such pretensions. This work is offered as a feminist one on the basis of both its theoretical application and its political stance, freely engaging with contemporary debates in and about feminist literary theory and gender studies.

Chapter 2 examines archival material in support of a psycho-sexual reading of Pym's personal relationship to food, considering how her life had an immediate and constitutive effect on the form and content of her work. The chapter begins by tracing how food filled Pym's consciousness, and explores how, through a discourse

⁵² Barbara Everett, "The Pleasures of Poverty", *Independent Women*, ed Rossen, 11.

⁵³ Cotsell, 7.

of food, she essayed the articulation of desire. It determines, however, that even as Pym experienced *jouissance* by consuming food and disgorging words, where '*le plaisir de la table*' translated into '*le plaisir du texte*'⁵⁴, her obsession with food indicates the displacement of a sexual preoccupation. Figuring Julia Kristeva's phenomenon of the abject as a theoretical backdrop, the examination of Pym's private writing reveals how her love of food superseded emotions elicited by personal intercourse.⁵⁵ The study maps the way in which an abject consciousness informed her expression of a sublimated desire and provided sustenance for her public writing.

Chapters 3 and 4 engage in close readings of the novels, developed through a socio-anthropological filter which offers insight into English middle-class 'tribal customs' contemporary with Pym's fifty years of writing, especially as these customs relate to gender codes and their supporting mythologies. Chapter 3 examines the relationship of Pym's women to food, considering how food acts as a symbol of female friendship and a metaphor for proto-feminist action when women eat together, particularly when they choose to reject man's meat. Furthermore, Pym problematises the received notion of food as sexual metaphor ('woman as food') by figuring food as a metonym of female desire when women eat alone. Here Pym's heroines fall within a behavioural spectrum, with the self-indulgent type at one end and the self-denying at

⁵⁴ The phrase is borrowed from George Bauer's examination of the culinary dimensions of Roland Barthes' writings, in "Eating Out: With Barthes", *Literary Gastronomy* ed David Bevan (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988), 39.

⁵⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* trans Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982)

the other: "How would she eat when alone? Half a lobster and a glass of chablis at Scott's -- or baked beans on toast and Coca Cola in the Kenbar Cafe at Barkers".⁵⁶

Chapter 4 explores how Pym effects a cultural inversion, playing with the notion of men's relationship to food as sexual metaphor: man as woman's meat. By examining how food factors within the dialogical relationship between the sexes when women prepare and serve food to men, this chapter demonstrates the manner in which Pym upends conventional cultural wisdom which decrees that food represents a metonymic site of male power. In considering allegations of Pym's misandry, it looks at the manner in which she turns her gaze on men and myths of male superiority, treating with ironic detachment the notion of a unified male ego. In the subsequent analysis, Pym's men are categorised according to three principal patterns: the 'hunter', who falls prey to Pym's women and finds himself an object of consumption; the 'child', whose relationship to women exists as an arrangement with Freudian implications, qualified by a system of serving and denying, driven by a principle of pleasure for the trivial and the mundane; and finally, the 'queer'⁵⁷, often the most vital character within the Pymian world, whose *gaucherie* contrasts markedly with the heroine's reserve. This type of man offers a critical counterpoint to the heroine's ironic perspective, providing stiff competition in the industry of serving food with a view to satisfying men's needs.

⁵⁶ MS PYM 50, folio 8 recto-verso.

⁵⁷ See Chapter 4 for more on the sexual politics of the term 'queer' and Pym's use of it.

By analysing Pym's exposure of the cultural myths of food in relation to their gender implications, this thesis shifts the critical perspective on what may be a well-documented, but is also a poorly-examined, Pymian textual practice. In so doing, it offers an alternative interpretive model radically different from the traditionalist one effected since her 're-discovery', one that subscribes instead to Pym's 're-covery' for feminist readership and scholarship.

Chapter 1: Whetting the Appetite for Pym, Food, and Feminism

Jane Gallop once noted in relation to the presence of the conjunction *and* in the title of a work of critical inquiry, as in the title of this study, "Food *and* Gender in the Fiction of Barbara Pym", that

[it] serves to indicate either the author's study of little- or well-known intersections between the two domains, or a projection of a possible fruitful union. Within this tradition the most strenuous task allotted to *and* might be to connect two substantives that are totally indifferent to each other.¹

Since Pym's novels resemble textual cornucopias, even those only casually acquainted with her fiction will recognise how central at least one 'domain' featured in this study's title is to the formation of her art. Pym is an undeniably 'foody' writer. Her novels are filled with references to food, both consumed and unconsumed, some of it appealing and some utterly unappetising, and to people eating both singly and together, while women are usually confronted with a meal's inevitable aftermath: the washing up. Readers of Pym will be familiar with the various components of a pattern Pym meal and with the rituals of eating which occur in Pymdom: the boiled chicken usually enveloped in a white sauce served to men in religious orders; the poached eggs and welsh rarebits women served themselves during the final stages of post-war rationing; the meat served to men at all times; the blancmange, or 'shape', served as pudding; and the ubiquitous, restorative cups of tea served on all occasions. The prevalence of food in Pym's fiction signals her near-clinical obsession with what is both a biological and social phenomenon, in that "[her] novels contain", as one critic has observed, "a history of the changing diet of England from the 1930s to the late 1970s".²

¹ Jane Gallop, *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: The Daughter's Seduction* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 1.

Because Pym's obsession with food as a literary theme or device is easily documented, the author's relationship to food is now considered a key part of the Pym mystique. Her most devoted fans -- dubbed by Barbara Bowman, "the gently obsessed"³ -- feel compelled to mention food whenever they speak or write of her, and it is now seen as a *sine qua non* in the cult of personality built around Pym's fame. For instance, in detailing the 1994 Annual General Meeting and Dinner of the Barbara Pym Society, Eileen Roberts states that "[n]o self-respecting Pym article can appear without a report of the food", as she minutely itemises the contents of the two meals consumed.⁴ And as the theme for the 1997 Annual General Meeting was 'Barbara Pym and Food', Society member Miss Maby generously provided for publication a copy of a menu which she served to Pym on the occasion of one of the writer's visits, thinking it "might be of interest" to others to know what Pym had eaten on a weekend away.⁵ Finally, Pym's name and work is also invoked in the publication and marketing of cookbooks: there is the American-published *The Barbara Pym Cookbook*, and more recently, its British re-publication under the title *A la Pym: The Barbara Pym Cookery Book*.⁶ These contain recipes of various dishes mentioned in the novels with

² Jane Nardin, *Barbara Pym* (Boston: Twayne, 1985), 20.

³ Barbara Bowman, "Barbara Pym's Subversive Subtext: Private Irony and Shared Detachment", *Independent Women*, ed Rossen, 84.

⁴ Eileen Roberts, "The 1994 Annual General Meeting and Dinner", *Green Leaves: The Journal of the Barbara Pym Society* 2(1) March 1995: 2.

⁵ *Green Leaves* 3(1) March 1997: 1. Although Miss Maby has carefully recorded meals consumed from supper on Friday to lunch on Sunday -- including such culinary delights as "junket and bananas" and "fish fingers with tomato and baked beans" -- she appears to have forgotten the year of Pym's visit, recording this as "the weekend of 1st, 2nd, 3rd of November ????".

⁶ Hilary Pym and Honor Wyatt, *The Barbara Pym Cookbook* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1988); and Hilary Pym and Honor Wyatt, *A la Pym: The Barbara Pym Cookery Book* (London: Prospect, 1995).

selections from Pym's own catalogue, incorporating appropriately 'foody' passages culled from her texts. One reviewer of *A la Pym* notes that not only are Pym's own recipes "redolent of a way of cooking that no longer exists" -- consistent with the notion that her novels record the conventions of an indigenous English middle-class way of life that is also a thing of the past⁷ -- but reading the accompanying selections of her fiction draws one both to the kitchen and even more strongly to "the bookshelf, to read her wry, measured, lethal prose again".⁸ For this reviewer, as with so many others, food and Pym's fiction appear mutually inclusive.

Occasionally, however, Pym's name registers within a somewhat more intellectualised sphere in relation to her handling of food in literature, suggesting that the subject manifests greater complexities within her texts than are presented through a dialogue with the trivial, as offered by menus served at Barbara Pym Literary Weekends. Notably, Pym is the only writer of fiction featured in the introduction to Margaret Visser's study of the anthropology of the meal, an inclusion merited by her facility -- no doubt based upon her experience with anthropological theory and technique accrued from years of editorial work at the International African Institute -- in observing and detailing the cultural constructs which relate to food and foodways.⁹ As Visser affirms, "Pym's novels are full of sly insights into culinary anthropology".¹⁰

⁷ Nicola Beaman defines the middle-class as "neither the castle nor the hovel, the top drawer nor the bottom, but that large class of people in between who would prefer life to go on rather as it always has done, people of a comfortable frame of mind who cling, conservatively, on the established moral framework". *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel 1914-39* (London: Virago, 1983), 7.

⁸ Nigella Lawson, "A Plateful of Blessings", *Green Leaves* 2(2) Feb 1996: 6.

⁹ According to Frederick Simoons, the anthropological term 'foodways' refers to "the modes of feeling, thinking, and behaving about food that are common to a

Hazel Holt verifies the existence of this anthropological intertext, noting Pym's practice in "observation, annotation and deduction", and pleasure in consulting the anthropologists' handbook, *Notes and Queries in Anthropology*, her favourite quotation being: 'Not even the slightest expression of amusement or disapproval should ever be displayed at the description of ridiculous, impossible or disgusting features in custom, cult or legend' (*VPE*: 266). Pym's sense of the ridiculous was highly developed, though, and she found amusement in a colloquial definition of anthropology, 'the study of man embracing woman' (*CS*: 411)¹¹, while the anthropological turn of phrase ("I have eaten polenta to bursting"¹²) or reference to food ("Zande eating putrescent meat"¹³) invariably diverted her, as her diaries record. The fact that Pym skews the professional objectivity of her fiction with humour and irony, thereby contravening the anthropologists' oath, explains why she was a novelist and not an anthropologist, according to Holt.¹⁴ Yet there is no doubt Pym saw the literary merit in the scientific practice of observing and chronicling patterns of human behaviour, including foodways, which offered insight into the 'tribal customs' of the

cultural group." He goes on to add that "foodways determine which of the available food resources a group eats and which it rejects; through cultural preferences and prejudice they may present major barriers to using available food resources and raising standards of nutrition". *Eat Not This Flesh: Food Avoidances in the Old World* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1961), 3.

¹⁰ Margaret Visser, *Much Depends on Dinner* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1986), 19.

¹¹ Pym notes how the "concept of 'detachment' reminds [her] of the methods of the anthropologist, who studies societies in this way. The joke definition of anthropology as 'the study of man embracing woman' might therefore seem peculiarly applicable to the novelist".

¹² Hazel Holt, "The Novelist in the Field: 1946-74", *The Life and Work of Barbara Pym* ed Dale Salwak, 27.

¹³ MS PYM 45, folio 27 recto.

¹⁴ Holt, *A Lot to Ask*, 169.

English middle-classes featured in her novels. She recognised that the anthropologists and their studies -- particularly of food -- provided valuable material for character development, dialogue, and plot:

An anthropologist who knows what the members of a society eat already knows a lot about them. Learning how the food is obtained and who prepares it adds considerably to the anthropologist's store of information about the way that society functions. And once the anthropologist finds out where, when, and with whom the food is eaten, just about everything else can be inferred about the relations among the society's members.¹⁵

In applying the above maxim to Pym's texts, it may be suggested that an investigation of where, when, and with whom Pym's characters eat -- in addition to noting what is eaten -- allows us similar opportunities to infer 'everything else' about relations among the members of the society that populates her fiction.

One principle of culinary anthropology which appears to have captured Pym's literary imagination is the notion that food is gendered. The fact that her fiction, besides revealing an obsession with food, is also concerned with issues of gender is unarguable. A vast majority of the critical exegesis regarding Pym's work is fuelled by her treatment of women and men, of relationships between them, of love, marriage, and even sexuality. Pym's treatment of certain aspects relating to gender roles and expectations, as these are circumscribed by the social influences of culture, class, and history, is well documented.¹⁶ Her readers may not be aware, though, that through symbolic investiture and a tradition of association, food helps to define gender; it is

¹⁵ Peter Farb and George Armelagos, *Consuming Passions: The Anthropology of Eating* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), 4.

¹⁶ See, for example, John Halperin; Janice Rossen, *Independent Women*; and Ellen M. Tsagaris, *The Subversion of Romance in the Novels of Barbara Pym* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Press, 1998).

not readily apparent that the seemingly bland conjunction *and* within the coefficient 'food and gender' connects two substantives (following Gallop's terminology) that, far from being indifferent to each other, are inextricably linked. The marriage of food and gender, a long-time rich source of scholarly pursuit for the social scientist, seems a naturally attractive obsession for a writer like Pym, who loved to eat and ate for love. But it is also true that the connection between food and gender in Pym's texts is not always as overt as the passage from *Jane and Prudence*, which juxtaposes the eating habits of Prudence and Arthur, would suggest (*JP*: 44-5). Though her texts are generally described as 'popular' and 'accessible', there is a complexity to Pym's treatment of this material which has confounded numerous critics and commentators.

In response to the paucity of rigorous studies of Pym's treatment of food in relation to its gender implications, this thesis seeks to uncover a 'fruitful union' between the two domains in her fiction -- an apposite analogy as the symbolic economy evident in the word 'fruitful' doubles as reference to both food (fruit itself) and gender (through an allusion to fertility) -- by engaging with the sexual/textual politics of Pym's culinary anthropology. The study is well supported with social scientific evidence, both in theory and praxis, which delineates the co-dependence of food and gender, revealing how food itself is metaphorically gendered, and how a gendered human subject is formed at least partly by the food it eats. Furthermore, the cultural-theoretical application is seasoned with a feminist literary critical one, creating a blend that offers greater insight into Pym's textual practice through an analysis of the formation of a gendered subjectivity in her texts, locating a discourse

of desire within the Pymian scene of eating. An examination of the nature and extent of the union between food and gender as it is manifested in Pym's work helps to revise notions about the 'unreconstructed-ness' of her writing, showing that she does indeed operate -- contrary to Robert Liddell's assertions -- within some sort of ideological framework. The first step in this effort is to explore further, in general terms, how social scientists deem food to be gendered and how this relationship figures in a classic Pymian context -- 'A man needs meat' -- a seminal phrase which serves as the first half of the study's title; the second is to consider other critical appraisals of Pym's treatment of food to determine how Pym makes this device work on a number of different levels; and the third is to conclude with an examination of two other relationships in which (to cite Gallop yet again) the conjunction *and* connects two substantives that are historically indifferent to each other -- 'Pym and Feminism' and 'Men and Feminism' -- with an idea to forming other 'fruitful unions' which will serve as the study's political and theoretical backdrop.

Food and Gender: A Fruitful Union

All living creatures maintain a primary relationship with food because it is one of life's necessities, a key to survival. Eating is an intrinsic, natural biological phenomenon. For humans, in particular, food "functions as a synecdoche for the lifestyle itself", according to Mervyn Nicholson, who quotes writer Patrick White ('food is, after all, life') before continuing:

[food is] the physical process of being and becoming. More exactly, food is a synecdoche for the lifecycle experienced not as a benign rhythm but as an inescapable force that contains/controls the life of every individual: 'Eating, drinking, dying -- three primary manifestations of the universal and impersonal life', in Aldous Huxley's words.¹⁷

But because cultural perceptions of food -- or what is known as foodways (part of what anthropologists refer to as 'material culture') -- are developed over generations of ritual and tradition, while in-depth knowledge of food's nutritional value only forms part of a modern epistemology, its sociocultural and sociohistorical significance often transcends, outweighs, or obscures its functional merit. Certainly humans must eat, but that does not prevent them from -- indeed, it leads to -- investing food with meaning outside its ordinary remit.

Anthropologists Peter Farb and George Armelagos claim that "human behaviour has evolved in great part as an interplay between eating behaviour and cultural institutions", further positing that such "behaviour, in turn, influences anatomy, physiology, and the evolution of the human organism itself".¹⁸ Social historian and food commentator Margaret Visser expands on the notion that there is a link between food and cultural institutions, observing that

[p]recisely because we must both eat and keep on eating, human beings have poured enormous effort into making food more than itself, so that it bears manifold meanings beyond its primary purpose of physical nutrition. It becomes an immensely versatile mythic prototype [...], an art form, a medium for commercial exchange and social interaction, the source for an intricate panoply of distinguishing marks of class and nationhood.¹⁹

To these two institutions of social order affected by food -- class and nationhood -- a third must be added: gender. Just as one's attitude to foodway rules can identify racial or national affiliation or signal class status, so does it correspond to one's gender identity. This connection between race, class, and gender is further marked by an

¹⁷ Mervyn Nicholson, "Eat -- or Be Eaten: An Interdisciplinary Metaphor", *Mosaic* 24/3-4 Summer/Fall 1991: 193.

¹⁸ Farb and Armelagos, 4.

¹⁹ Margaret Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1991), 2.

analogue of binary hierarchies composed of dominants and subordinates, underpinned by a tradition of associated mythic subtexts. Rules and prescriptions are also enacted to protect identities (whether these be racial, cultural, national, class, religious, or gender) and to help maintain social order.

Food acquisition, preparation, and consumption often follow strictly-enforced rules, and social sanctions may be levied against those who refuse to adhere to them. Frederick Simoons, an anthropologist whose expertise is food avoidance, observes, for example, that rules of food prohibition are developed for four main reasons: unfamiliarity, familiarity, fear of contamination, and prestige.²⁰ The unfamiliar is avoided until its physical and spiritual effect can be ascertained; in the same way, we avoid food that may contaminate because of its deleterious effect upon the body or mind. The familiar is avoided because of cultural perceptions of kinship; our affinity with each other prevents us from acts of cannibalism while further restraining us from consuming animals we either keep as pets or revere as sacred. And finally, Simoons notes, prohibition maintains prestige, in that food avoidances are cultivated "by a favoured group in an effort to keep the best foods for themselves".

While all these rules can be administered to the advantage and/or disadvantage of certain groups within a society, it is a meritocracy that enforces the last rule, in particular, to ensure that favoured, powerful groups -- Simoons lists these as "old or prestigious men, members of particular societies or age classes, [and] persons

²⁰ Simoons, 115.

politically dominant"²¹ -- receive the best to eat. Logic insists that meritocratic societies are often patriarchal ones, too, where men hold prestige and women are far more likely to be bound by the exclusivity of food prohibitions; as Carol Adams notes, in cultures where food taboos exist, far more apply to women than men²², while even the very concept of 'taboo' itself is gendered.²³ Such taboos prescribe behaviour appropriate to the conduct of the masculine and the feminine, establishing a distinct hierarchy among the gender ranks.²⁴ This code of conduct supports standards of sexual differentiation -- "through the allocation and refusal of power and prestige, in kinds of employment, in clothing and socially approved physique, in carefully instilled outlook and expectation" -- which, in turn, ensure social structures are unequivocally maintained.²⁵ It is not difficult to imagine, then, how food taboos might be indexed to gender when the very act of "becoming a gender", as Judith Butler posits, is itself "an impulsive yet mindful process of interpreting a cultural reality laden with sanctions, taboos and prescriptions".²⁶

²¹ Simoons, 115.

²² Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 27.

²³ According to Visser, the word 'taboo' is derived from the ancient Maori concept of *tapu*, which concerns an oppositional belief in the sacred and the profane, where men achieve the former and women are relegated to the latter. *The Rituals of Dinner*, 14.

²⁴ Visser feels that the concept of 'hierarchy' may have its beginnings in food rituals. She notes that "some etymologists believe that the very word 'hierarchy', in Greek 'charge over sacred things', came from priestly superintendence over animal sacrifices". *The Rituals of Dinner*, 232.

²⁵ Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner*, 272-3.

²⁶ Judith Butler, "Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig and Foucault", *Feminism as Critique* ed Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 128.

In a meritocracy or patriarchy, those who hold power eat first and best without having to expend energy in food preparation. The reality of this conjunction bears out social scientific claims which hold that the very act of eating signifies the exercise of power -- of the consumer over the consumed, the advantaged over the disadvantaged, those who eat without having to prepare food over those who are mandated to prepare it.²⁷ It is the hierarchical nature of the eating act which further implies the workings of gender mechanisms; Hélène Cixous posits that our world is structured through oppositions, and where binary oppositions exist there is *always already* a gender hierarchy -- man/woman -- and this "hierarchy subjects the entire conceptual organization to man".²⁸ Within the scene of eating, then, the oppositions of the prestigious/the non-prestigious, the non-preparer of food/preparer of food, and the consumer/the consumed operate under the same gender schema as evidenced in the representative binary man/woman, where power and prestige is accorded to the masculine half of the order.

The obvious evidence supplied by differences in primary sexual characteristics, considered in tandem with a linkage between the binary opposition man/woman and other binary structures, supports an evolutionary theory of difference in gender roles and expectations for men and women. These correspond to, among other things, the foods with which each gender is associated. Paul Shepard states, for example, that

²⁷ Elias Canetti declares, "[e]verything which is eaten is the food of power". "On the Psychology of Eating", *Crowds and Power* trans Carol Stewart (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), 257.

²⁸ Hélène Cixous, "Sorties", *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* ed Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1981), 91.

[p]atterns for women set in the evolutionary past are different from those set for men. Women, who do not run after large game, have fat-storage systems that do not overload their vascular organs and contribute to heart failure.²⁹

This representative interpretation of evolutionary sexual difference gives rise to an adherence to socialised gender conventions which are, in turn, perpetuated as cultural myth, categorising women as 'gatherers' of plant foods. Woman-as-gatherer is a gender role that has become so ingrained in cultural mythology that, in cultures where women are not occupied in this activity, they still remain identified with food items that are traditionally 'gathered'. And, of course, within a hierarchy of foods, plant foods represent the inferior half of the binary when considered in opposition to animal foods. As anthropologists have observed in contemporary hunter/gatherer societies where women *do* gather food,

[t]he gathering of plant foods does not give women the same prestige [as men], even though at certain times of the year they may have provided eighty percent of the band's food supply. Plants simply do not have the prestige that meat does, presumably because a man can always go out and pick some berries or nuts, whereas a women cannot suddenly decide to go hunting.³⁰

The gender role assumed by men, in opposition to woman-as-gatherer, is man-as-hunter. As a cultural figure, Nick Fiddes notes how man-as-hunter "seems to stalk the world over", citing anthropologists Collier and Rosaldo, who found "unexpected regularities in the gender conceptions of several ("simple") societies", particularly that

²⁹ Paul Shepard, *The Tender Carnivore and the Sacred Game* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), 117-8.

³⁰ Farb and Armelagos, 48. According to numerous anthropological studies, however, it is not physical ability that prevents women from hunting, but cultural prohibition; in most subsistence cultures women are not allowed to hunt. And neither is it appropriate for men to gather food, despite the fact that they are physically capable of doing so. Hence, anthropologists note that in hunter/gatherer societies, men sit idle for much of the time, in between infrequent and relatively brief hunting forays, while women gather and prepare food for the better part of each day.

man-as-hunter, "which we thought to be our myth, turned out to characterize their conception of maleness".³¹ Yet, once again, in contemporary, industrialised societies where men are not required to hunt to procure food for survival, the cultural myth of man-as-hunter pervades the arenas where men are meant to succeed, particularly in competition with other men, whether the arena be professional, athletic, or sexual. Furthermore, the food-product of the male hunter -- meat -- figures as the ultimate food of success, authority, and domination because the consumption of it (to re-apply Cixous' phrase) *always already* involves the death of an animal. Or, as Mervyn Nicholson states,

[t]otal control is what the scene of eating enacts, especially when the food consumed is flesh. Eating meat is an assertion of power, because another living being has to be put to death to provide it. To eat it is to assert life/death control.³²

More specifically, though, killing and/or consuming others is the ultimate assertion of a masculine (and, subsequently, patriarchal) power, enacted by the man-as-hunter. According to Carol Adams, a meat-eating society is invariably a patriarchal society with its concomitant order of domination and subordination, and "mythologies of culture" decree "meat a masculine food and meat-eating a masculine activity".³³ Since eating meat equals eating power, it is the ultimate proof of the 'truth' behind the mythical dictum, 'you are what you eat'.

Having introduced the notion that animal and plant foods represent two halves of a binary opposition, an explication of the 'hierarchy of foods' offers further insight into the gendering of food and the mythologies of culture which support its sexual

³¹ Nick Fiddes, *Meat: A Natural Symbol* (London: Routledge, 1992), 145.

³² Nicholson, 205.

³³ Adams, 26.

politics.³⁴ Meats, referred to collectively as 'masculinised proteins', are the strongest, most powerful foods within the hierarchical system, with those considered taboo by most cultures (the flesh of humans and other carnivores) placed highest. Red meat, labelled 'strong' and 'powerful', occupies the next level, while white meat (poultry and fish) is weakest, due to its colour and the attendant myth that it is bloodless. On a level directly below meats lie those foods -- eggs, milk, and cheese -- known as 'feminised protein', since these are derived from female animals. It is acknowledged that although such foods are high enough within the hierarchy to support meals being structured around them, these are usually "confined to the low status events": breakfasts, light lunches, and meals singularly intended for women. One aspect that differentiates masculinised and feminised proteins (thereby subordinating the latter) is that meat normally requires cooking, whereas many of the feminised proteins, fruits, and vegetables may be eaten raw, without exposure to fire "(that masculine, powerful and technological element)".³⁵ Relegated to the lowest level of the hierarchy are the foods which connote femininity -- vegetables, fruits, and cereals. These are weakest within the hierarchical system and "insufficient for the formation of a meal, and merely ancillary" to the dominant culture's eating scheme.³⁶ The hierarchical format of this structure is explicit: to 'eat up' the scale is to eat meat, and to 'eat down' is to eat fruits, vegetables, and grains, while the binary oppositions, 'up/down' and 'animal foods/plant foods' operate in concert with others already mentioned: high/low, privileged/unprivileged, hunter/gatherer, and man/woman.

³⁴ See, for example, Julia Twigg, "Vegetarianism and the Meanings of Meat", *The Sociology of Food and Eating* ed Anne Murcott (Aldershot: Gower, 1983), 21-2.

³⁵ Visser, *Much Depends on Dinner*, 151.

³⁶ Twigg, 22.

Essentially, the human subject's introduction to the 'hierarchy of foods' is something like its exposure to language, in that foodway traditions have their own cultural, national, or regional variations, maintained within a hierarchical framework that pre-exists the eating subject.³⁷ The process of acculturation begins when the infant subject is born into this organic, dynamic foodway system with its pre-established rules and prescriptions, and through latent and blatant exposure to food 'custom, cult, and legend', assumes a cultural, racial, class, and gender identity; indeed, Margaret Visser maintains that "[t]he language one first learns to speak, and the food one is accustomed to eat in childhood, are two of the most fundamental preserves of an adult's social and racial identity".³⁸ It is the hierarchical patterning of foodways, ordered within a scale of eating 'up' or 'down', that marks out differences in the formation of gender identities for male and female subjects, while the mechanisms operative in the psycho-sexual formation of the gendered, *speaking* subject -- metonymy and metaphor -- are similarly crucial to the socialisation of the gendered, *eating* subject. To wit, the male subject's relationship to food is metonymical, and as an empowered member of a patriarchal-cultural hierarchy, eating first, best, and through the culinary industry of others means that the scene of eating becomes for him a metonymic site of masculine power. The female subject's relationship to food, however, is metaphorical.³⁹ Within the patriarchal scene of eating, she exists in

³⁷ According to Phyllis Passariello, anthropologist Mary Douglas preferred a linguistic analogy to a Lévi-Straussian structural format in the analysis of foodways, feeling that eating, like speaking, was a patterned activity. "Anomalies, Analogies, and Sacred Profanities: Mary Douglas on Food and Culture, 1957-1989", *Food and Foodways* 1990 4(1): 57.

³⁸ Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner*, 42.

³⁹ Nick Fiddes considers the metonymical and metaphorical relationship of gendered human subjects to meat only, in that meat is central to the structure of the

symbolic unity with food. Not only is she a subordinate within the culinary operation, rendering her a cook to the male consumer, but she is also an object of consumption within a male economy of desire: he is the 'consumer', she is the 'consumed'; he is the 'hunter', she is both his 'meat' and his 'prey'.

In this way, the symbolic associations enacted in foodway systems -- bearing in mind Nick Fiddes' caveat, "[f]oods do not intrinsically symbolise [but] are used to symbolise"⁴⁰ -- confirm how fraught with sexual-political meaning food and the act of eating can be, in that food and appetite commonly function as symbols of sexuality and sexual desire. Fiddes alleges that the connection between sex and eating may be partly explained through so-called 'natural' analogies: "that both perpetuate life, that both may be pleasurable, and that both imply vulnerability by breaching normal bodily boundaries".⁴¹ But within a culture of dominance, even more pervasive is the manner in which women, in particular, are objectified through metaphor in order that they might be separated from their ontological wholeness, fragmented into a number of fetishised parts, and thereby rendered sexually 'consumable' for male consumers. The imaginary conflation of this pairing, food and woman, no doubt finds its roots in cultural perceptions of the breast-feeding mother who gives of her own body to be eaten, satisfying the demands of an infantile hunger. It is in satisfying a mature and fully-sexualised hunger, however, that the female body is thought to 'nourish' the so-called male hunter. Indeed, Paul Shepard notes -- apparently without irony -- that

patriarchal meal, but the symbolic association of food and gender works throughout the food hierarchy.

⁴⁰ Fiddes, *Meat*, 41.

⁴¹ Fiddes, *Meat*, 144.

[t]he human hunter in the field is not merely a predator, because of hundreds of centuries of experience in treating the woman-prey with love, which he turns back into the hunt proper [...] The ecstatic consummation of his love is the killing itself. Formal consummation is eating.⁴²

Here it is suggested that the human hunter, gendered male by default, hones his hunting skills through pursuit, capture, and consumption of so-called 'woman-prey', an endeavour vindicated by a belief that "[t]he rhythm and physiology of [women's] life are so different from those of men that it is almost as though they were another species".⁴³ For him, consummation and consumption mark the same achievement reached through twin acts of empowerment, though Shepard warns that the male hunter, like "all carnivores", has a tendency to confuse these "two kinds of veneral aggression, loving and hunting".⁴⁴ Eira Patnaik would argue that such confusion can only occur in patriarchal, carnivorous cultures where mythologies and metaphorical language games figure woman as food and food as woman, so that "[t]he two, women and food are inseparable in people's imagination".⁴⁵

As a means of bolstering the cultural myths which proclaim man a hunter of food- and woman-prey, men commonly affiliate themselves with other predators -- birds of prey, wild dogs, or big cats -- thereby further entrenching their position as 'consumers', rather than as 'consumed'. When they do allow themselves to be objectified as food, through terms like 'beefcake', or when men indulge in the

⁴² Shepard, 173.

⁴³ Shepard, 118.

⁴⁴ Shepard, 172.

⁴⁵ Eira Patnaik, "The Succulent Gender: Eat Her Softly", *Literary Gastronomy* ed David Bevan (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988), 63. Patnaik also suggests that "[j]ealousy of woman's procreative powers may be an additional factor in promoting metaphors of edibility", 66.

metaphorisation of their own bodies, typically their sexual organs, such efforts merely serve to underpin the mythical homology proclaiming that 'you are what you eat'. Bull-like qualities of strength and determination, or over-sized genitalia and seemingly limitless sexual potency, are felt to transfer to meat's male consumers in a conspiracy of ignorance which obscures the fact that meat is usually derived from emasculated animals.⁴⁶ Alongside this metaphoric power play, though, a semiotic shift invariably occurs, a metonymic cue which signals to men that the possession and maintenance of power requires the consumption of it.

'A man needs meat': Anthropological Theory as Sexual/Textual Practice

It is understood that food is gendered -- through a tradition of association metonymically linking consumers to the food they are culturally mandated to consume, or through metaphor, wherein gendered, human subjects are imaged as food or food itself is assigned a gender identity -- but it remains to be seen how and why this concept factors within Pym's textual practice. The examination of a key phrase, 'A man needs meat', which features here in the first part of this study's title, offers an appropriate point of departure for such a discussion. This comic phrase, spoken by women to other women about men, best represents the nature of the relationship between the sexes in Pym's novels, fueling her sexual-political ideology, though its power is inevitably tempered by the device of high comedy.

⁴⁶ Carol Adams posits this notion, noting that "male genitalia and male sexuality are at times inferred when 'meat' is discussed (curious locutions since uncastrated adult males are rarely eaten)", 48.

The socio-cultural conventions of food and gender, with their related myths, captured Pym's literary imagination mainly because of their overt anthropological and covert sexual-political implications, in addition to the fact that they offer rich comic and subversive possibilities. Her writing reveals an awareness of the linkage of food and gender to other social systems of order (like class, nationality, age, and religion), and of the way foodway rules operate in conjunction with cultural myths regulating gender roles, by depicting the scene of eating as a front where gender battles are waged. The first half of this study's title, 'A man needs meat', which paraphrases an oft-repeated line from *Jane and Prudence*, serves as a locus of sexual-political meaning, its significance as heteroglossia located in the authority of its speakers, the scepticism of its listeners, and the complicity of the human subjects to which it alludes. In the context of this study, the phrase stands as an evocative representation of Pym's facility with the nuances of the food/gender dynamic, leavening its various cultural ramifications through the interleaving of its metonymic and metaphoric associations.

The line is first uttered by Mrs Mayhew and echoed by Mrs Crampton, pattern 'Excellent Women' whose cultural mandate -- revealing a near-evangelical belief in the sacredness of the masculine appetite -- is to uphold and promulgate myths of male superiority which guarantee the indulgence of men. The feeling one has that these two characters are seemingly interchangeable and their identities easily confused (Robert Liddell deliberately transposes their names, noting that "*because both meant, both spake the same*"⁴⁷) is underscored by their joint allegiance to an ethos of male

privilege; in Pym's fiction, such women operate as 'gatekeepers' of both food consumption and of patriarchal cultural values.⁴⁸ It is apparent, though, that the novel's chief 'gatekeeper' is the elderly spinster Miss Doggett, whose false worldliness leads her to believe she knows what truths lurk beneath the myths of masculinity:

"They say, though, that men only want *one thing* -- that's the truth of the matter". Miss Doggett again looked puzzled; it was as if she had heard that men only wanted one thing, but had forgotten for the moment what it was. (JP: 79)

Miss Doggett's misinformation regarding men and their appetites serves as the focus for another ludic moment when she declares ("in an authoritative tone") that the anthropologist Everard Bone is an 'anthropophagist' (JP: 142). Her propensity for malapropisms not only betrays her insularity and undermines her authority as a guardian of patriarchal cultural values, but recalls an earlier reference to cannibalism when Jane Cleveland wonders about the leonine Fabian Driver, a noted 'lady-killer': "Did he eat his victims, then?" (JP: 35), she muses, upon learning that he will eat a casserole of hearts for lunch that day. The conflation here of a man's meal and his consumption of female victims links a physical and sexual hunger, suggesting that a man's appetite for meat serves as a gauge of his desire for women and an indication of his knowledge of the ways of flesh.

Yet the cultural myth of 'man-as-hunter', whose desire for meat is metonymically linked to his position of power, is cleverly and ironically exposed in Pym's text when the handsome Fabian finds himself both objectified and 'consumed'.

⁴⁷ Liddell, *A Mind at Ease*, 35.

⁴⁸ The theory of women as 'gatekeepers' of food consumption comes from William Alex McIntosh and Mary Zey, "Women as Gatekeepers of Food Consumption: A Sociological Critique", *Food and Foodways* 1989 3(4): 317-332. This theory will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

When he attends an altar-dressing session in preparation for a church festival cradling a large marrow in his arms, Miss Doggett declares, "What a fine marrow, Mr Driver [...] It is the biggest one we have had so far", while Mrs Mayhew "reverently" concurs, "It is magnificent" (*JP*: 33). Pym then allows two women characters, in whom she cultivates some degree of scepticism regarding rules of masculine authority, the opportunity to register their dissent, though this is couched in typical Pymian sublimation. While Jessie Morrow betrays her recognition of the sexual irony through 'inaudible mumbling', Jane Cleveland feels "as though she were assisting at some primitive kind of ritual at whose significance she hardly dared guess" (*JP*: 33); her imagination obviously touches on the alarming 'Ancient Doctrine of Signatures', "where the hidden virtue of plant or animal is revealed through external appearance, indicated through shape, colour, [or] texture".⁴⁹ As mediums of the Pymian point of view, Jessie and Jane can read, on a more or less conscious level, the overtly phallic significance of being confronted by an attractive, virile man in possession of a 'large', 'magnificent' marrow. Their resistance to the power of Fabian's enhanced charms leads one to believe they see through the cultural myths which decree, as Michael Cotsell suggests, "that man needs meat to grow such a marrow".⁵⁰ Through their enlightened perception, Fabian appears compromised to us rather than empowered by his oversized root vegetable, as his generously-appended form renders him the object of a female gaze. Later still, when the man with a reputation for consuming his victims finds himself, in turn, hunted and 'consumed' by Jessie (she systematically courts him and proposes marriage, winning him over her rival, Prudence Bates), Pym's

⁴⁹ Farb and Armelagos, 49.

⁵⁰ Cotsell, 59.

gender subversion effectively concludes with cultural inversion: woman as 'hunter' and man as her 'meat' or 'prey'.

Jessie may desire Fabian (though her calculated hunt for a husband appears largely emotionless) but remains detached when it comes to the myths which have privileged him in the past. Her ambivalence, expressed through a sharpened wit, leads her to treat him like a child in need of indulgence rather than as a 'hunter' requiring meat in order to sustain his predatory strength. "I shouldn't like to keep you from your steak. A man needs meat, as Mrs Crampton and Mrs Mayhew are always saying", she says to him, "[waving] her hand in dismissal". He hurries away, "conscious of his need for meat and of the faintly derisive tone of Miss Morrow's remark, as if there were something comic about a man needing meat" (*JP*: 62). Jessie's bemused attitude toward the patriarchal cultural conventions which celebrate meat signals her irreverence, but she is willing to indulge these myths in order to satisfy her own wants and needs, which are (for now) to secure a husband.

For Jane, the issue of the privileging of men is somewhat more problematic, though also amusing. She is unable to express her ideological position through irony as Jessie does for she is constrained by the reticence of the pattern Pym heroine (though Jane can be more indiscreet than most). Instead, the alliance of her perspective with that of the narrator allows readers access to her dissenting viewpoint, as this remains internalised. When, for example, Jane's husband, Nicholas, features as

an object of indulgence for both Mrs Mayhew and Mrs Crampton, Jane silently

questions their endorsement of his physical needs at the expense of her own:

At last Mrs Crampton emerged from behind the velvet curtain carrying two plates on a tray. She put in front of Jane a plate containing an egg, a rasher of bacon and some fried potatoes cut in fancy shapes, and in front of Nicholas a plate with *two* eggs and rather more potatoes.

Nicholas exclaimed with pleasure.

"Oh, a man needs eggs!" said Mrs Crampton, also looking pleased.

This insistence on a man's needs amused Jane. Men needed meat and eggs -- well, yes, that might be allowed; but surely not more than women did? [...] Nicholas accepted his two eggs and bacon and the implication that his needs were more important than his wife's with a certain amount of complacency, Jane thought. (*JP*: 55-6)

That Nicholas unquestioningly accepts a larger portion of food, with "the implication that his needs [are] more important than" Jane's, reveals key attitudes concerning right of privilege fuelled by contentions inherent in our society regarding expectations of gender. Consonantly, the various female sages who authoritatively claim they know *just* what a man needs, marked through the repetition of variations on this mantra, 'a man needs meat', refrain from issuing analogous judgements concerning how food can supply a woman's physical, psychological, or emotional requirements. Pym's readers are left in no doubt, however, about the implications of this decree: the dominant culture dictates that a woman's needs are to provide a man with all he desires -- in other words, a woman needs a man who needs meat. Nevertheless, according to one of Pym's (male) anthropologists, the seemingly lop-sided relationship linking a capable woman with a dependent man is "reciprocal" -- "the woman giving the food and shelter and doing some typing for him and the man giving the priceless gift of himself" (*LA*: 72).

Pym is careful to ensure that her heroines' responses to the demands of male privilege are not misinterpreted, indicating that men should not be denied meat (for it is true that her texts, in showing the state of things, offer an implicit commentary rather than representing a utopian ideal). Jane notes that it 'might be allowed' men needed meat and eggs, adding, "but surely not more than women did?" This slyly rhetorical query best represents the nature of Pym's subversive ideology, suggesting that a celebration of the masculine need not be effected through a degradation of the feminine, and this is figured in typically covert fashion. As Barbara Bowman explains,

[Pym's] fiction offers no programmatic hope that the relation of dominants to subordinates might change, though it does suggest that subordinates receive certain compensations for their inferior status [...] the greatest of these [being] a superior power to judge those around them.⁵¹

The subtlety of Pym's subversion, then, presented not through formal or linguistic experimentation but in a realist, accessible style, should not preclude us from "locating the politics of [her] writing precisely in her textual practice" -- just as Toril Moi suggests with the modernist Virginia Woolf.⁵² It is through her textual practice that Pym defies received notions of the romantic and unsettles our ideas of a fixed gender system. And food, part of the daily rhythm of life that makes up 'the trivial round, the common task'⁵³, while also imbued with limitless symbolic significance, offers Pym a perfect vantage point from which to survey and comment on the inner workings of the patriarchy.

⁵¹ Bowman, 85.

⁵² Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), 16.

⁵³ This is a favoured Pymian phrase which often features in her early novels, taken from John Keble's *The Christian Year*.

The Trivial Pym

While this study contends that food and the scene of eating are irrevocably linked to representations of gender in Pym's fiction, it is also the case that she uses food as a device to indicate a range of other phenomena as well. As Maggie Lane explains in her study of Jane Austen and food, "[t]he advantage of selecting a self-limiting topic like food is that it offers *multiple* ways into the texts"⁵⁴, and this holds true for Pym, too. This single figure is employed by a thrifty Pym for various purposes while also presenting to readers different ways in which to engage with her texts.

The general consensus among Pym's critics in their assessments of her use of food suggests that its prevalence in her novels arises from her obsession with detail. So, since food acts, according to Janice Rossen, "as a device with documentary significance"⁵⁵, Pym's realist depictions show her to be "an acute social historian", as Charles Burkhart labels her.⁵⁶ Food, along with descriptions of clothing and surroundings, contribute, according to Annette Weld, to "the delineation of a finely textured background" forming Pym's fictional world⁵⁷, what Penelope Lively calls a "world of interiors".⁵⁸ In this way, Pym's novels are less like Austen's than they are like Dickens', "who [also] builds up solidity of his world through detail".⁵⁹ But like

⁵⁴ Maggie Lane, *Jane Austen and Food* (London: Hambledon Press, 1995), xv.

⁵⁵ Janice Rossen, *The World of Barbara Pym* (London: Macmillan, 1987), 123.

⁵⁶ Charles Burkhart, *The Pleasure of Miss Pym* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 23.

⁵⁷ Weld, 116.

⁵⁸ Penelope Lively, "The World of Barbara Pym", *The Life and Work of Barbara Pym* ed Dale Salwak, 48-9. She adds as an afterthought, "food has a rich and subtle language of its own in the novels".

⁵⁹ Lane, xi.

Austen, Pym does use food to define personality and emphasise moral character. And she also sometimes represents the scene of eating as a communal, collective one, in the Rabelaisian sense, where the "collective process is not a biological, animal act but a social event"⁶⁰; consequently, eating can facilitate community in Pym's novels, or reveal a failure of communication among her characters and the inadequacies of society. Finally, Pym's anthropological insight means that food rituals assume enhanced comic possibilities and regularly form the foundation of her humour. It is interesting to note, though, that all critics who consider the treatment of food in Pym's texts -- with the exception of two -- do so only inasmuch as they see it operating as an adjunct to other thematic or formal concerns whose interests prevail within the realm of Pymian scholarship, whether these be love, marriage, ageing, spinsterhood, a celebration of the mundane ('the trivial round, the common task'), or her technique as a writer of comic or ironic realism.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* trans Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 281.

⁶¹ A rough survey of the diversity of studies on Pym -- using the accompanying bibliography as a reference -- reveals that at least ten are concerned mainly with issues of love and/or marriage; another ten deal with characterisations of women (two others concentrating specifically on her treatment of spinsters); four relate to her treatment of men; six with the trivial or everyday; at least ten deal with issues of style and form, treating Pym's comedy, satire, or irony; two with her realism -- one even argues in favour of Pym as a Modernist; two cite Pym as a novelist of 'manners'; four discuss issues of Christianity or Anglicanism; three trace Pym's poetic allusions; eight deal with literary influences -- of those, no fewer than six essay some sort of comparison to Jane Austen; at least six consider Pym and/or her texts from an anthropological perspective; three discuss Pym's relationship with Philip Larkin; at least ten others are mostly biographical in scope; and, finally, there are a few studies that deal with unique topics (one, for example, is concerned with speech patterns in Pym's texts). There are also twelve book-length studies of Pym, some decidedly biographical and others more critical in design, all of which survey to some degree a variety of the subjects listed above.

No doubt Pym would have been the first to admit that she eagerly embraced matters of a trivial nature: she records in a wartime notebook, "detail is important. Food, clothes, furniture, décor and domestic things".⁶² And she was clearly an admirer of authors who cultivated a similar obsession with trivia, appreciating a writerly generosity that satisfied her readerly curiosity. Annette Weld notes that of two of Pym's favourite authors, one -- Denton Welch -- shared her penchant for trivia, while another -- Jane Austen -- was meaner with details concerning food and clothing than Pym would have liked.⁶³

For her own efforts, Pym preferred 'a crowded canvas', well-populated with characters and a richness of detail -- what people looked like, ate, wore, carried in their hands or in bags -- sketched in around them as an accompaniment to her narratives of mundanity. Critics and reviewers have commented endlessly, both pro and con, on the dimensions of Pym's canvas -- crowded, admittedly, but rather limited in scope. Barbara Everett describes the narrowness and 'mildness' of Pym's texts in positive terms, as "a question of her liking and seeing the necessity for a certain kind of smallness and randomness and unromantic ordinariness".⁶⁴ But those who criticise her for what they see as an uncontrolled obsession with detail claim Pym padded her novels with superfluous material at the expense of developing more complex plots.

⁶² MS PYM 90, folio 6 recto.

⁶³ Weld, 116. Maggie Lane explains that as food in Austen's novels is usually an indication of character, "[n]either Emma, nor any character who enjoys the author's approval, ever describes a meal that has been eaten or a meal anticipated. The same prohibition governs the narrator, whose ladylike persona holds herself aloof from sensual pleasures", xii-xiii.

⁶⁴ Everett, 19.

These negative reactions to her trivial bent caused Pym to question rhetorically within her diary,

What is wrong with being obsessed with trivia? Some have criticised my novel Sweet Dove Died for this. What are the minds of my critics filled with? What nobler and more worthwhile things?⁶⁵

But the criticism, along with years of rejection and disappointment, began to affect the way in which Pym observed and recorded details of life around her:

Lunch at the Royal Commonwealth Society with Bob. In the restaurant all those clergymen helping themselves from the cold table, it seems endlessly. But you mustn't notice things like that if you're going to be a novelist in 1968-9 and the 70s. The posters on Oxford Circus station advertising Confidential Pregnancy Tests would be more suitable. (*VPE*: 350)

Always attracted to the extraordinary latent in the ordinary, external pressures forced Pym to reconsider its value for her art. But she persevered with her observations and record-taking, and was vindicated in the late '70s when her unerring eye for detail was again praised for picking out the "small poignancies and comedies of everyday life".⁶⁶

Food trivia held a particular fascination for Pym because she herself so often thought about it; Hazel Holt recalls that food "was a great subject of conversation" between them.⁶⁷ It is perhaps for this simple reason that the traditionalists, when examining the role it plays in Pym's art, rely upon consciously unreconstructed approaches to the significance of food and the scene of eating in her texts. Barbara Brothers explains the logic behind this, arguing that "[f]or many critics and literary historians, the substance of [Pym's] novels is merely their descriptive and accurate recordings of details of everyday life, the novels raising no more serious issues than

⁶⁵ MS PYM 68, folio 9 recto-verso.

⁶⁶ Larkin, "Reputations Revisited", 66.

⁶⁷ Holt, "The Novelist in the Field: 1946-74", 31.

matters of social propriety".⁶⁸ One thinks, in this case, of Robert Liddell, who states in support of his claim that Pym's writing is "concrete", how details in food and clothing help "create the world that is Barbara's achievement"⁶⁹, what he calls 'Pymdom', so that such detail assumes a superficial significance and is not required to function on a deeper level. When Pym does play with food imagery, he contends, this she limits to similes which conjoin greater concepts with the mundane, a "yoking together of heterogeneous ideas" which may arise from her love of metaphysical poetry.⁷⁰ Her reading of Milton's sentiment, "Imparadised in one another's arms", which causes her to muse, "or was it somehow encasseroled bay leaf resting on chicken flesh?", appears to bear out Liddell's point (though it *is* pertinent that Pym chooses to convert a classic sexual reference into a bland, domestic one -- for her, a characteristic comic juxtaposition of high and low).⁷¹ But while he may be correct in suggesting that Pym employs similes in this manner in conjunction with food references that enliven her imaginary world, Liddell's assessment tends to ignore Pym's symbolic strategies by refusing to engage with her texts' sexual politics.

Annette Weld and Barbara Brothers, in qualifying her texts as contemporary 'novels of manners', also consider how Pym's use of detail raises matters of social propriety. They both persuasively argue how her eye for detail in food and clothing

⁶⁸ Barbara Brothers, "Love, Marriage, and Manners in the Novels of Barbara Pym", *Reading and Writing Women's Lives: A Study of the Novel of Manners* ed Bege K. Bowers and Barbara Brothers (Ann Arbor and London: UMI Research Press, 1990), 155.

⁶⁹ Liddell, *A Mind at Ease*, 104.

⁷⁰ Liddell, *A Mind at Ease*, 105.

⁷¹ MS PYM 56, folio 11 recto.

can be linked to their codification within a certain literary tradition, helping to form character and plot according to generic convention. Though Weld warns that "[t]here is little room for multiple levels of meaning or symbolic obscurity" within the parameters of the novel of manners where "social phenomena determine value", she recognises that in Pym's fictional world, "[f]ood becomes not just subsistence, but a communal activity, a measure of character, a metaphor for love, and therapy for what ails you".⁷² Brothers presents a similar claim, alleging that Pym's "characters' dress, manners, pastimes, and concerns are comic; that is, much importance is attached to appearance and trivialities -- to what ones drinks or eats, to who leaves the office first", while she, too, downplays food's symbolic value: "these differences in individual behaviour reflect merely personal proclivities, not the nuances or demarcations of social class or moral choice".⁷³ The representation of food as a social phenomenon, a must for fiction concerned with a character's response to social mores, demands that Pym concern herself with the trivia of the quotidian. Pym's 'observational method', based on "careful journal keeping, notebook jotting and diary entries of a lifetime", Weld posits, "results in a fictional verisimilitude found usually in historical novels".⁷⁴ And again, Brothers' thesis forms a parallel, noting that as Pym's novels chronicle life's details, they record "everything from changes in eating and drinking habits and in courting rituals to the influx of blacks and Asians into the communities and work establishments of London".⁷⁵

⁷² Weld, 14, 64-5.

⁷³ Brothers, "Love, Marriage, and Manners in the Novels of Barbara Pym", 158.

⁷⁴ Weld, 203.

⁷⁵ Brothers, "Love, Marriage, and Manners in the Novels of Barbara Pym", 159.

Novels of manners conventionally deal with a set of characters' abilities to read social codes and tailor their behaviour to suit company and environment. Food is one such code, or as anthropologist Mary Douglas states, "[f]ood categories [...] encode social events".⁷⁶ So how a particular character responds to food rituals, whether in preparation, consumption, or rejection, serves to confirm personality, marking individuality or idiosyncrasy as much as it does more transcendent issues like class or national identity.

A number of Pym's commentators survey how she employs the trope of food as a method of depicting character. Weld feels, for example, that

Pym differentiates Jane and Prudence by such broad-brushed strokes as their marital states, their milieux, and their temperaments, but [...] develops their personalities by delineating the minor details of dress, food, or social behaviour,⁷⁷ while the same effect is achieved with the contrasting characters of Dulcie and Viola in *No Fond Return of Love*. And a man's relationship to food can prove particularly significant in that food appears to encode a message of sexuality (and, therefore, of 'suitability', to be read by Pym women on the 'hunt'). Weld notes, "[h]omosexuality is suggested, usually by their fussing over food, in a parade of finicky men"⁷⁸; Janice Rossen echoes, "the fussy attitude adopted by some male characters towards food acts as a comic sidelight on their finicky (usually homosexual) natures"⁷⁹; Laura Doan reiterates, "[t]he bachelor's obsession with the trivial, suggested here by finicky eating habits, exposes his shallowness and indicates how utterly oblivious he is to the mood

⁷⁶ Mary Douglas, "Deciphering a Meal", *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 249.

⁷⁷ Weld, 100.

⁷⁸ Weld, 177.

⁷⁹ Rossen, *The World of Barbara Pym*, 123.

or opinions of others".⁸⁰ These critics quite rightly see food as a sort of litmus test, and not just of a character's sexuality, but of morality (a notion Barbara Brothers rejects), of personality -- even of spirituality; while any sign of obsession, greed, indifference, or uncouth or déclassé behaviour, though admittedly comic, serves to dispel readerly sympathies. On the other hand, as Rossen notes, a character's "properly regulated interest in food can [...] indicate a keen sensibility and attendant *savoir faire*", adding: "[o]ne is what one eats in a Pym novel, in more ways than might be imagined".⁸¹

Since foodways form part of a social system, an individual's pattern of food behaviour must be read against a paradigm of social norms, best effected in situations which feature the scene of eating as a social event. Although Pym's texts often depict the phenomenon of eating alone -- indeed, Jane Nardin has observed that "Pym is also interested in a pleasure that has perhaps never received much attention from any other novelist: solitary eating"⁸² -- they just as often depict scenes where diverse characters are drawn together for meals. In his treatise on the novel, E.M. Forster posits that food is often employed by writers as a vehicle to facilitate community, bringing characters together and promoting interaction; he states that

[f]ood in fiction is mainly social. It draws characters together, but they seldom require it, seldom enjoy it, and never digest it unless specifically asked to do so. They hunger for each other, as we do in life, but our equally constant longing for breakfast and lunch does not get reflected.⁸³

⁸⁰ Laura L. Doan, "Text and the Single Man: The Bachelor in Pym's Dual-Voiced Narratives", *Independent Women* ed Janice Rossen, 66-7.

⁸¹ Rossen, *The World of Barbara Pym*, 123-4.

⁸² Nardin, 21.

⁸³ E.M Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1927), 53.

For Forster, food as a literary device is 'mainly social' while the detailing of its consumption can seem both antisocial and antithetical to plot. For this reason (his argument appears to suggest), descriptions of food and eating work best if they locate a community of characters while intimating their desires and emotions. Mrs Ramsay's meal of 'Boeuf en Daube' in Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* provides a classic example of Forster's notion of the scene of eating as a social catalyst, drawing disparate characters together and thus giving readers access to their deeper thoughts through both interaction and reaction, while the beef symbolises the texture of the characters' lives and its presentation replicates the serving up of the young couple, Paul and Minta, for marriage. References to food within this scene are sporadic; it is mentioned only enough to remind us of the characters' purpose for being together.⁸⁴ Indeed, it is only when the candles are lit for dinner that Mrs Ramsay's group finally appear "composed, as they had not been in the twilight, into a party round a table".⁸⁵

In the numerous instances in Pym's novels where the scene of eating serves to facilitate intercourse of some sort, food provides opportunities for her disparate characters to interact -- and for her heroines to observe. What is served to whom has a key significance in a social setting, and "Pym always has an ear (or palate) for what is suitable for an occasion", while communal eating "stresses ritualistic significance",

⁸⁴ Key to this scene is the fact that all references to eating depict the activity of men; the women, and Mrs Ramsay in particular, are not seen eating. See Elizabeth Dodd, "'No, she said, she did not want a pear': Women's Relation to Food in *To The Lighthouse* and *Mrs Dalloway*", *Virginia Woolf: Themes and Variations (Selected Papers from the Second Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf)* ed Vara Neverow-Turk and Mark Hussey (New York: Pace University Press, 1993), 153-7.

⁸⁵ Virginia Woolf, *To The Lighthouse* [1927] (London: Vintage, 1990), 90.

as Rossen notes.⁸⁶ Within this eating environment, a character's behaviour with food can reflect an emotional state, affecting their behaviour towards others, while an obsessive interest in food -- how it is cooked or dressed, how it is presented or tastes, the amount served -- reveals a person's egotism or self-interest, antisocial behaviour counterproductive to the cultivation of a sense of community. Perhaps one of Pym's most effective representations of a culinary community and its implications, where food is used in an attempt to create order out of disorder, can be found in *An Unsuitable Attachment*, when an odd assortment of members from Mark Grainger's parish travel to Rome. As the various characters express, both implicitly and explicitly, their needs and desires in a defamiliarized setting, we learn much about Sophia's emotional frailty when the pathos of 'wines that do not travel' causes her eyes to fill with tears, and about the insensitivity of the pattern Pym male when she later complains to the other women present, "How tiresome the men are being [...] Showing off their knowledge when they should be advising us what we ought to eat" (UA: 176). And even in instances such as these, when her characters are drawn together (though not necessarily out of 'hunger for each other') Pym obliges her curious readers by always taking the time to itemise the menu.

But it must be said that for Pym food and its consumption are not necessarily allied to the social conventions of co-operation, companionship, or interdependence, despite the fact that as a social system foodways are designed to harmonise with and promote these three principles of community living. Many of Pym's critics have

⁸⁶ Rossen, *The World of Barbara Pym*, 123.

commented on her acute observations regarding failures of communication among a society's various members (indeed, there appears more disparity than community in the scene of eating in Rome), noting that some of the social history she details in the course of fifty years of writing concerns the increased dysfunction of (post)modern British society and the marginalisation of the individual. This is especially apparent in her late novels which effectively deal with issues of ageing and retirement, and their attendant feelings of redundancy and uselessness, with loss of physical and mental health, and with the breakdown of traditions and rituals which once provided a framework for social stability and order. Jane Nardin argues that "[p]erhaps the best symbol of the degree to which community has disappeared from the world of *Quartet in Autumn*", for example, "is to be found in the unwillingness of its characters to share food with one another", adding,

[t]he many sumptuous dinner, supper, and tea parties that Pym's early novels describe so attractively, emphasizing the pleasures of society and hospitality, are here reduced to the most joyless, minimal sharing of food imaginable.⁸⁷

Nardin also notes, in relation to what she calls the "shattered community" depicted in Pym's last novel, *A Few Green Leaves*, "traditional English amusements, clothes, and food have all disappeared"⁸⁸, leaving an adulterated, fragmented society in its wake.

This Pym symbolises quite simply in one passage when Daphne Dagnall, on a country walk with others, spies a patch of purple which turns out to be "no rare spring flower or even the humblest violets but a discarded wrapper of a chocolate bar" (*FGL*: 10).

⁸⁷ Nardin, 127

⁸⁸ Nardin, 135.

Although Pym's late novels are not so 'light' as their predecessors, their social commentary being more sharply defined (her own experience with ageing and loss of health, and the rejection and disappointment she encountered in both her love life and her writing life finds expression in a somewhat blacker, less cosy fictional world), the corpus of her work does display a characteristic humour, and critics agree that food and food rituals often lie at its source. Rossen confirms the importance of food as a joke in Pym's novels⁸⁹, agreeing with Michael Cotsell regarding the wealth of comedy Pym finds inherent in the field of anthropology. As Cotsell says:

Pym's use of the sign system of food goes back to *Some Tame Gazelle*, and food and its consumption had a particular point in the post-war days of rationing, but it is also clear that anthropology gave her a new sense of deeper comic possibilities.⁹⁰ Nardin claims food is used as "a running joke to unify a novel", specifically citing the case of a passage already discussed here: the way in which "*Jane and Prudence* suggests several variations on the old saw that men only wanted one thing, with extremely humorous effect".⁹¹ And social interaction conducted within the boundaries of an eating event offers countless comic possibilities as well. As Bakhtin has noted, "[p]randial speech is a free and jocular speech"⁹², with the result that in the unguarded moments which accompany satiety, there always exists the potential for Pym's otherwise straitened characters to say something that strikes an observant narrator or heroine as odd and a discerning reader as funny -- witness the scene of eating in Rome, previously mentioned, when Sister Dew drinks Chianti, "saying that she 'quite' liked it and found it 'something similar to Wincarnis'" (UA: 159).

⁸⁹ Rossen, *The World of Barbara Pym*, 124.

⁹⁰ Cotsell, 57-8.

⁹¹ Nardin, 27.

⁹² Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 284.

It is in the connection between food and sex, however, that most critics find Pym's funniest, because basest, humour, liberally seasoning the more genteel, mannered material that supports her high comedy. Here, too, at this juncture linking food and sex, some of her critics come closest to venturing into gendered interpretations of food. In the brief analysis accompanying Robert Emmet Long's narrative descriptions, he notes that Harriet Bede (*STG*) "cannot keep her hands off fruit in the sideboard, and her hard-to-quench appetite has sexual overtones"⁹³; Jane Nardin alerts us to the comic sexual overtones of the phrase 'cooking his meat' (*EW*), also noting its "relevance to the customs of the primitive peoples Everard [Bone] studies"⁹⁴; and Michael Cotsell, whose reading of the phallic significance of Fabian Driver's marrow has already been noted, comments further on this same incident: "[t]here is a subtle sexual play in all this [...], a recognition of what runs under the genteel surface".⁹⁵ Though there is a general sense among many of these inquiries of a covert sexual significance to Pym's food references, some critics display a certain reticence in attributing this design to a writer of cultured sensibilities like 'Miss Pym'; but even a conservative like Charles Burkhart is forced to admit the nature of this reality: "[o]ne does not exactly like to rush to the conclusion that sex and food are the same thing, but there are intimations [in Pym's novels] that this is so".⁹⁶

⁹³ Robert Emmet Long, *Barbara Pym* (New York: Ungar, 1986), 26.

⁹⁴ Nardin, 81.

⁹⁵ Cotsell, 58.

⁹⁶ Charles Burkhart, "Glamorous Acolytes": Homosexuality in Pym's World", *Independent Women* ed Janice Rossen, 99.

Others, however, are not so coy or hesitant in reading Pym's food as sexual metaphor. While Nardin warns that it is "a mistake to suppose that every activity [is] related to sex", she adds, "Pym agrees, but food is a different matter and really does pervade daily experience". Indeed, Nardin locates the pleasure of Pym's text in her descriptions of food and eating:

Although Pym seldom describes sexual activity -- thus tactfully implying that perhaps its importance in many people's lives tends to be exaggerated by contemporary novelists -- she is lavish in her descriptions of food -- implying thereby that food as a pleasure, and as a part of the texture of daily life, has not received its due in the novel.

And sometimes, Nardin finds, "food [in Pym's novels] is clearly more seductive than sex"⁹⁷, implying that the characters translate their sexual desires into physiological ones in a form of deferred gratification. In an even more unabashed reading, John Bayley argues, "[u]nlike food [...] sex can be most present in a novel when it is never directly mentioned", adding, "Pym's novels in this way are as full of sex as Hardy's".⁹⁸ But in perhaps the most astute analysis of all concerning Pym's treatment of food and sex, Jan Fergus alleges:

This metaphorical equation [of sex and food] in Pym's novels, brilliantly expounded by Victoria Glendinning, and briefly noted earlier by Jane Nardin, suggests that sex and food, two worlds generally thought to be disparate, can in fact be hilariously confused and conflated.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Nardin; all quotes found on page 20.

⁹⁸ John Bayley, "Maschler Pudding", *London Review of Books* 17(20) 19 October 1995: 3.

⁹⁹ Jan Fergus, "A Glass of Blessings, Jane Austen's *Emma*, and Barbara Pym's Art of Allusion", *Independent Women* ed Janice Rossen, 128. The reference Fergus makes to Glendinning's unpublished talk is included in a footnote: "The talk, entitled 'The Pym Man', was given on 5 July 1986, at the Barbara Pym Conference held at St. Hilda's College, Oxford. Glendinning rightly pointed out that sex and desire are continually talked about in Pym's novels, via displacement onto food and even woollen goods. She noted, for example, that wives tend to give husbands poor food in the novels, and that the caterpillar found by Miss Prior in her cauliflower cheese in *Some Tame Gazelle* is the best example -- that is, the funniest -- of male sexuality in the early novels", 136fn.

Fergus' examination of a passage in *A Glass of Blessings*, featuring the Marvellian conceit of 'vegetable love' ('the kind of [love represented by] a vast growing vegetable incorporates another kind of absurdity -- more hilarious and perhaps in Pym's context not altogether removed from crude phallic humour'¹⁰⁰), effectively treats issues concerning both the comic and the symbolic. The fruitful union of food and sex -- notwithstanding its pointed opportunities for indulgence in phallic humour -- is encoded with a social as well as a biological component, inscribing different messages for different members of society. As Fergus rightly advises,

[i]n a sense, choice of food suggests not simply the comic expression of one's sexuality but larger, more painful issues concerning the choices life presents, its rewards and disappointments,¹⁰¹

thereby implying something this study unstintingly articulates: that Pym's novels highlight through the analogy of food how many of life's 'choices' are circumscribed by the conventions of gender roles and expectations.

Notions alluded to by Fergus regarding the significance of the metaphoric union of food and sex and of the scene of eating as a metonymic site of sexual desire are analysed at length in the course of this study, when the positions of certain critics surveyed here are re-introduced in an effort to support an argument or present an opposing view. As previously mentioned, the works of all critics and commentators considered thus far treat food, though generally regarded by them as a favoured element in Pym's textual practice, which acts only as a subordinate to other themes and motifs. What remains to be reviewed in this section are two articles which deal

¹⁰⁰ Fergus, 130.

¹⁰¹ Fergus, 129.

exclusively with the subject of food (or, in one case, drink) as a dominant structural paradigm informing Pym's *oeuvre* -- an undertaking rendered even more topical as the authors of these studies engage in what amounts to gender analyses of Pym's texts.

In the first case, Rosemary de Paolo examines the consumption of drink in Pym's novels, alleging that what her characters "choose to drink, when, and how much are central issues in the definition of character and class"¹⁰²; de Paolo's thesis, like the title of her study, states succinctly that in Pym's novels, 'you are what you drink'. In surveying the meaning of drink in the texts, beginning with the ritual phenomenon of late afternoon tea adhered to by all levels of English society (while "the drinking of tea at other times can be a mark of a character's lack of gentility"¹⁰³), de Paolo observes that tea and hot milky drinks act as palliatives. Alcoholic drinks, though, can be a worry (for Pym's women, especially; when a thin, nervous-looking woman wins a bottle of red wine in a raffle, she seems "to shrink away from the bottle, so dark and menacing, which [is] to be her prize [*FGL*: 69]). Drink is also a "precipitant or an obstruction to action", sometimes central to the development of plot and other times incidental -- as when Esther Clovis is obliged to resign as secretary of the Learned Society because of her inability to make tea properly ("Hot water from the tap had been used, the kettle had not been quite boiling, the teapot had not been warmed ..." [*LA*: 12]).¹⁰⁴ Esther's experience suggests that there exists a

¹⁰² Rosemary de Paolo, "You Are What You Drink", *The Barbara Pym Newsletter* II(2), December 1987: 1.

¹⁰³ de Paolo, 3.

¹⁰⁴ de Paolo, 1. She claims in her article that Esther Clovis is 'fired', but, in fact, Esther's quarrel with the president of the Society leaves her "bound to hand in her resignation" (*LA*: 12).

politics of drink, just as with food, revealing not only how the trivial can assume a heightened significance when ritual is improperly observed, but also providing insight into the nature of a ritualistic society and the character of its members.

The real value of de Paolo's study (despite its brevity and occasional slips into plot summary) lies with its position that a politics of drink is, in effect, a politics of gender. First, de Paolo details the way in which drink can operate as a substitute for love and as a sexual threat -- once again, the bottle of lusty red wine won in the raffle springs to mind. Second, in helping to define character, she claims "choice of beverage" -- which usually signifies the 'choice' one feels socially constrained to make -- "is intimately tied to notions of self-identity and worth, and that notion mostly, but not wholly, splits along gender lines".¹⁰⁵ In this way, de Paolo observes in Pym's fiction that men and women drink differently, where the traditional "association between men and wine or liquor", for example, "is merely a reflection of larger issues of self-evaluation and power",¹⁰⁶ consistent with the general theory of consumption which holds that men eat and drink whatever will serve to reflect their socio-sexual advantage. Those of Pym's women, on the other hand, who "expected very little -- nothing almost" in life (*EW*: 37) drink tea as a means of signalling the state of their "reduced and unassuming" (and overwhelmingly domestic lives), while those women "who have a greater sense of personal worth, who choose a wider scope in life, who have expectations" (who, in other words, operate according to a set of values once an exclusive part of masculine privilege) "drink alcohol".¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ de Paolo, 4.

¹⁰⁶ de Paolo, 4.

In the only other article to deal solely with the implications of food and gender in Pym's fiction -- with results somewhat more problematic than de Paolo's -- Mary Anne Schofield employs a Lévi-Straussian model (where 'the raw' and 'the cooked' are linked to a nature/culture binary) in an ambitious attempt to show that the preparation of food is closely tied to the cultural success or failure of Pym's female subjects. Schofield states, for example, that those of Pym's heroines who prefer raw salads to cooked meat have chosen "non-social isolation rather than communication [and thus] fail as cultural agents", as it is the duty of the cultural agent (who prepares food) to civilise the culturee (for whom food is prepared) through the mediation of food with fire.¹⁰⁸ By Schofield's reckoning, Emma Howick, Mildred Lathbury, Belinda and Harriet Bede, Leonora Eyre, Dulcie Mainwaring, and Ianthe Broome all fail in their role as cultural agents because they "cannot" convert men into civilised beings -- read: 'husbands' -- due to their preference for raw food over cooked.

At least one hindrance to the success of Schofield's argument must be this reliance upon Lévi-Strauss' raw/cooked theory -- where gender is often de-politicised -- as her sole technical support.¹⁰⁹ Also, in manipulating some of Pym's textual evidence to fit this theoretical framework, she presents a picture of Pymian sexual politics that is slightly off-kilter. Though Schofield concludes that in "[d]ebunking the predominant romantic myth, Pym shows that women's place, though she might *be* in

¹⁰⁷ de Paolo, 3-4.

¹⁰⁸ Mary Anne Schofield, "Well-Fed Or Well-Loved? Patterns of Cooking and Eating in the Novels of Barbara Pym", *University of Windsor Review* 18 Spring/Summer 1985: 7.

¹⁰⁹ For detailed critiques of Lévi-Strauss' theories, see Fiddes, *Meat*, 15; Farb and Armelagos, 104-6; and Mary Douglas, "Deciphering a Meal", 250.

the kitchen, is not a nourishing role at all", implying that this culinary 'failure' serves as a sort of accidental socio-sexual subversion, she adds,

[h]er women cannot transform men into civilized creatures, nor can they make themselves into caring cooks. Pym uses the symbolic matrix of cooking and eating to underscore the isolation and hunger that twentieth-century men and women continually face.¹¹⁰

Schofield's reading thereby denies these women the *subjective* agency Pym endows them with. While it may be true that some of Pym's heroines choose 'non-social isolation' over 'communication', preferring to cultivate the role of observer rather than participant, this is not due to 'failure', which denies agency, but abjection, which may or may not be conscious but necessarily involves an element of control. An abject sensibility (like Mervyn Nicholson's concept of 'revulsion': it "is a response to involuntary *participation* in the lifestyle -- one is part of it, not outside it"¹¹¹) constitutes a form of rejection of the patriarchy's meat. One abjects oneself to ensure that one is *not* part of it, that one remains outside it. But even as Pym's heroines eat raw food themselves, they also willingly cook for and serve meat to the men in their lives, thereby enacting the ideology which sustains Pym's subversive subtext, where passive resistance underlies tacit acceptance. So in response to Schofield's assessment (in addition to noting that of all the heroines she lists as failed cultural agents each succeeds in 'taming' a man, though some heroines choose to reject these men), it is not that these women 'cannot' civilise and nourish, but that they sometimes *choose* not to. On the whole, then, the complexity of the relationship that exists between Pym's heroines and food is inadequately served by Schofield's narrow cultural reading.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Schofield, "Well-Fed Or Well-Loved?", 7-8.

¹¹¹ Nicholson, 196.

¹¹² A more detailed examination of Schofield's arguments appears in Chapter 3.

Indeed, evidence supplied by current applications of poststructuralist theory exploring the phenomenon of the representation of food in literature suggests that the existing scholarship, like Schofield's, which examines food in relation to Pym's fiction, is old-fashioned, leaving the subject underdetermined. Evelyn Hinz explains about the contemporary critical mandate of studies of food and literature:

No longer is the focus on how food and drinking provide a conducive setting and, by extension, innocent analogies to describe imaginative activities; nor are references to food and drink in a literary text regarded as incidental 'realistic' touches or as constructed symbols. Instead, the focus is now on how eating and drinking in themselves constitute an elaborate and complex sign language which metonymically brackets and informs all aspects of discourse and human experience.¹¹³

Hinz describes here the greater relevance to contemporary epistemology of studies that analyse how the sign system of food modifies human life and language, compared to those which treat food simply as a social, documentary, or symbolic device. This position need not devalue certain examples of past research on Pym's treatment of food, for a number of scholars have contributed significantly to knowledge of Pym's biography and textual practice, but it suggests much remains to be said about her subjectification of a food/gender dynamic, particularly as previous attempts in this regard merely introduce the subject or are, unfortunately, misinformed. Since we know that a food system operates like a code whose interpretation contributes to human social development, wherein this system 'metonymically informs' human discourse and experience through a dialogical relationship with other hierarchical systems of social order -- including gender, class, and even age -- it is especially important that Pym's treatment of food not be separated from its associations with gender for it is at this locus that she rises above the merely trivial.

¹¹³ Evelyn Hinz, "Introduction: Diet Consciousness and Literary Trends", *Mosaic* 24/3-4 (Summer/Fall 1991), v.

Connecting the 'totally indifferent': Pym and Feminism

Clearly the most effective way in which to examine how food informs a gendered subjectivity in Pym's work is through a feminist literary critical application, one which encourages a critic to read her texts, as Alison Light suggests, "*symptomatically*, as speaking to [them] simultaneously of a resistance to, and containment within, a normative bourgeois femininity".¹¹⁴ Janet Todd also supports such a reading, claiming that "to read texts symptomatically (metaphorically) is obviously an immense gain over the naive reading that failed to grasp the anxieties and tensions in a text, as well as those similar qualities in the reader".¹¹⁵ But while such a reading may justify the application of a critical strategy that is often grounded upon a radical politics to Pym's realist, old-fashioned texts, it is just as likely to highlight the anxieties and tensions existent within the Pymian critical sphere as it will those in her writing. As previously mentioned, the intersection between Pym and feminism is problematic, complicated by the issue of her popularity with a certain group of traditionalist, mainly male critics, by a campaign of proscription against feminist criticism waged by her literary guardians (we recall Holt's fight "to keep Barbara out of the hands of the feminists"), and by Pym's political nescience and the often conflicting ideas she held regarding her own role in what Rita Felski labels "the traditional script of heterosexual romance".¹¹⁶ In sorting through the source and nature of these conflicts and by investigating how

¹¹⁴ Alison Light, "Writing Fictions: Femininity and the 1950s", *The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction* ed Jean Radford (London: Routledge, 1986), 161.

¹¹⁵ Janet Todd, *Feminist Literary History* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 80. She adds, "[b]ut to read *only* symptomatically is to find in them only symptoms of present systems of thought".

¹¹⁶ Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 129.

other critics have coped with the question of Pym's political affiliations and their manifestations in her texts, it is hoped that the anxieties and tensions formerly induced by Pym's co-option for a wide-ranging feminist readership will be relieved. Once again, Jane Gallop's innocuous conjunction *and* may then be seen to connect two substantives -- Pym and feminism -- which form a fruitful union.

Part of the difficulty in mapping the development of Pym's political sensibility lies in getting beyond the barrier represented by her youthful naiveté. Hazel Holt alleges that when Pym went up to St Hilda's College, Oxford, in 1931, "she was very naive by today's standards", adding that "[g]irls grew up more slowly then -- they were certainly more romantic and with a kind of enthusiastic innocence that would be impossible today".¹¹⁷ Holt also states categorically that Pym was "quite uninterested in politics of any kind", noting her mercenary attitude towards them:

Her father was the sort of professional, middle-class man who would naturally vote Conservative and although Barbara occasionally went to Labour Club meetings in Oxford it was [...] more for the young men than for the politics.¹¹⁸

According to Robert Emmet Long, Hilary Pym has also remarked on her sister's "lack of political consciousness", claiming it "was not greatly different from that of many others of her background" -- "'middle-middle class ... out of the provinces', where insularity was a strong feature of life".¹¹⁹ This logic is offered, then, as an excuse to account for the way in which her Oxford diaries seem unaffected by the political and social upheaval Britain and Europe were experiencing in the early 1930s. Just as Jane Austen has been accused of glossing over the historical truths of the Napoleonic Wars

¹¹⁷ Holt, *A Lot to Ask*, 21.

¹¹⁸ Holt, *A Lot to Ask*, 68-9.

¹¹⁹ Long, 7.

-- and Holt consciously compares Austen's and Pym's schoolgirlish behaviour (in Pym, "[o]ne is reminded of the description of the young Jane Austen as the 'prettiest, silliest, most affected, husband-hunting butterfly'"¹²⁰) -- Pym's early diaries make little reference to the domestic situation in Britain and regrettably reveal a lack of intuition with regards to political developments in Europe.

These diaries record details of Pym's trips to Germany in the 1930s where she became involved in a love affair with a young officer in the German SS. She describes her first meeting with him in an entry dated 31 March 1934:

It was then that I had my first sight of real Nazis and of Friedbert Gluck [name boxed in ink]. He was wearing a black uniform [...] I remember being much impressed by him, and thinking him a marvellous approachable Nazi.¹²¹

In another entry from only a week later, she confirms Friedbert's effect upon her:

My time in Germany meant that I began to take an interest in Hitler, Nazis and German Politics. I made a scarlet box with a swastika on it. I bought a small swastika to wear on a pin.¹²²

Although her admission may seem unpalatable to the modern reader, it is likely that Pym's initial interest in German politics was more opportunistic than anything else, serving the same purpose as her attendance at Labour Club meetings: to appear attractive to men by affecting an interest in their pursuits. Anne Wyatt-Brown has noted this tendency as well, and cites Jay Martin, a psychoanalyst and literary critic, in remarking that "individuals like Pym make intense but 'transient identifications' with those who attract them".¹²³ This phenomenon explains Pym's passion for Finnish culture and the Swedish language after Henry Harvey moved to Helsingfors (Helsinki)

¹²⁰ Holt, *A Lot to Ask*, 29.

¹²¹ MS PYM 102, folio 57 recto-verso.

¹²² MS PYM 102, folio 66 recto.

¹²³ Wyatt-Brown, *Barbara Pym*, 33.

in the mid-30s, and her interest in Scottish geography and Gaelic language inspired by a flirtation with a Scottish soldier ("we had tea at the Coach and Dogs then went to the pictures and afterwards learnt some more Gaelic. *Mo run feal dileas...*").¹²⁴

Both Hazel Holt and Robert Liddell offer explanations for Pym's behaviour at this time, excusing questionable conduct by citing her light-hearted ignorance while under-representing the extent of her flirtation with German National Socialism in an effort to protect her reputation. In *A Very Private Eye*, Holt edits out the entries of Pym's first meeting with Friedbert and of her swastika purchase. She does admit, however, that Pym, who "was really rather naive" (both Holt and Liddell use this term consistently when qualifying Pym's youthful waywardness), once joined in singing *Deutschland Uber Alles*, and Holt weighs the wisdom of this act against the fact that

[t]hese were the early days of National Socialism but Barbara was far more concerned with the language, poetry and the general romanticism and *Stimmung* of Germany than the politics, which interested her not at all. (*VPE*: 13)

Later, in writing Pym's biography, where Holt may have felt obliged to editorialise a little more on this subject, she writes, "[i]n those early days of National Socialism [Pym], like most of her contemporaries, had only the vaguest idea of what it was all about and did not care enough to question things she was not interested in", though Holt concedes that "[p]erhaps she was more naive than most".¹²⁵ Liddell, for his part, attributes Pym's extreme behaviour to an 'unfashionable' lack of social or political insight, with the result that she "helped to feed the Hunger Marchers in Oxford [in February 1934], and in September of the same year was 'very impressed' by Hitler".¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Holt, *A Lot to Ask*, 102.

¹²⁵ Holt, *A Lot to Ask*, 69.

¹²⁶ Liddell, "Two Friends", 63.

He also obscures the truth about Pym's swastika, claiming her "charming admirer, Friedbert", gave it to her, emphasising, "though she had no Nazi affiliations". And while an early manuscript version of *Some Tame Gazelle* had much in it of Nazis in exile, Liddell encouraged Pym to remove all references to them: "though myself also politically rather naive and innocent, I felt that Barbara had overdone it".¹²⁷

Archival evidence, however, suggests that Pym may have been showing some signs of a political conscience in youth, though her opportunistic impulses were strong and led her to exercise poor judgement, as proven by the German affair. Publicly, she waxed lyrical about Friedbert and German politics, provoking many of her friends to offer words of caution; one rebuked her: "It's good that you have been to Germany and can talk it. Oh but *please* don't admire those *filthy* Nazis in their beautiful (sic!) uniforms".¹²⁸ But Pym cultivated her enthusiasm in part as a response to Friedbert's great regard for her as compared to Henry Harvey's indifference, and she probably sought to arouse Harvey's jealousy ("The Germans at least appreciate me if the English don't" [VPE: 57]). Privately, though, Pym harboured doubts about Friedbert and his politics, noting in May 1935:

After Germany I was in love with Friedbert in a way. I put it so because I realised even at the time that most of it was probably glamour. [She lists things to love about him] -- for all these things I loved him and yet hardly knew him as a person and didn't at all agree with his National Socialism, although I tried [...].¹²⁹

And Pym's Oxford diaries record her opinions of other political movements as well.

Liddell mentions how she blithely helped the hunger marchers (Holt further noting her

¹²⁷ Liddell, *A Mind at Ease*, 14.

¹²⁸ Holt, *A Lot to Ask*, 68.

¹²⁹ MS PYM 103, folio 27 recto.

"motive was humanitarian rather than political")¹³⁰ but she actually participated in the march and was able to formulate a first-hand opinion (albeit a negative one) about the marchers' ideological impetus:

At about 9.45 we left together with the Hunger Marchers -- the idea of me marching behind the October Club banner (which I did) is ludicrous -- also shouting, under the direction of a kind of cheer-leader '1-2-3-4- Who are *We* For? *We* are For the *Working Classes* -- *Down with the Ruling Classes*. Students join the Workers' struggle' etc. Still I wish them luck even if I do disapprove of much that Communism stands for. (VPE: 49)

No doubt her views are neither well-informed nor soundly constructed, but at least Pym gave more thought to politics than either Holt or Liddell is willing to concede. Indeed, she garnered much of her immature political thinking from friends' activities, including Liddell himself. He is being somewhat disingenuous in declaring his own political naiveté as Liddell entertained Pacifist notions and wrote to Pym in February 1935 that he and his brother had become vegetarians -- perhaps her first inclination of a connection between vegetarianism and political activism.¹³¹ Certainly Pym had some familiarity with the terms of Pacifism, too, as in 1938 she met a young man named Julian Amery at a Pacifists' meeting and later "made a half-hearted effort to convert" him "to Pacifism", noting in her diary, "though I wasn't entirely converted myself".¹³²

¹³⁰ Holt, *A Lot to Ask*, 69.

¹³¹ MS PYM 153, folio 57 recto.

¹³² MS PYM 103, folio 70 recto. Pym enjoyed only a brief affair with Amery, whom she refers to as 'Jay' in her diaries, though his effect on her was profound; he is the inspiration for a number of male characters in the novels. And Pym's record of Amery makes him appear even more naive than she: he claimed that there were worse things than war, and if "Beauty was going out of his life he would simply shoot himself". Instead he was celebrated for his heroics in the war effort, later married Harold Macmillan's daughter, and became an MP; see Robert Emmet Long, 10.

The onset of war brought Pym a much-needed context in which to analyse her political peccadilloes, and though her diaries still concentrate on depictions of her domestic and social milieux, she reveals occasional moments of introspection:

One would hardly know that there was a war on at all [from my diary], and certainly not have any idea that I was an intelligent and presumably thinking person. Or perhaps I do think a little, but not about anything that really matters to anyone except myself. (*VPE*: 224-5)

After the war, once Pym became a published writer, increased introspection is evident in her diaries. However, her already prodigious observational skills made her a keen student of social codes and personal relationships, and she developed a sophisticated grasp of the subtleties of gender politics -- a facility she never had with other political realities. In this regard, her diaries suggest she may have been inspired by the writings of Virginia Woolf -- she read *To the Lighthouse* in 1931, again in 1942, and *A Room of One's Own* in 1943 ("so delicious that I could quote whole paragraphs"¹³³) -- and after finishing *A Writer's Diary* in 1954, Pym responded "less to Woolf's development as a writer", says Judy Little, "than to her feminism and implicit social criticism".¹³⁴ While there is nothing of Woolf's modernist style in Pym's writing, her concurrence with Woolf's feminism, which may be apparent in Pym's women-centred texts which re-write traditional scripts of romance (her way of coping with her own frustrations in this field) is confusingly diffused with the traceable influences of more old-fashioned -- and unfashionable -- reading. In Pym's novels a Woolfian proto-feminism shares textual space with the moralising conventionality of a didactic Victorian writer like Charlotte M. Yonge, whose politics were famously *anti-feminist*.

¹³³ MS PYM 109, folio 83 verso.

¹³⁴ Judy Little, "Influential Anxieties: Woolf and Pym", *Virginia Woolf Miscellany* 39 (Fall 1992), 5.

The evidence of these conflicting ideologies as revealed through observations in her diaries and working notebooks and in her fiction make Pym a tricky person to categorise. Her diaries record, for example, her unease with 'modern' representations of women and with changes to normative gender roles. The advent of an aggressive, sexualised image of women in the 1950s aroused Pym's latent misogyny:

On TV, I thought that women have never been more terrifying than they are now -- the curled head ('Italian style'), the paint and jewellery, the exposed bosom -- no wonder men turn to other men sometimes.¹³⁵

Later, with the emergence of 1960s' androgyny, she was struck by "the rough students with long hair and strange one-sex clothes [that] make [her] feel old and vulnerable" (*VPE*: 364). And yet despite this apparent ambivalence towards women, Pym denied that she was anti-feminist (*VPE*: 431), and often reacted warmly to social innovations which signalled some form of female empowerment, even in cases where women seemed to act like men: "Iris has rejected her husband -- used him and then passed on. So often one sees men doing this it is heartening, encouraging and refreshing when a woman does".¹³⁶ Representations of women such as this -- for the 'Iris' entry refers to Iris Horniblow (*AQ*), an 'emancipated' female academic, single mother (and drinker of alcohol) who is professionally disadvantaged, being required to leave her socialising male colleagues due to her domestic constraints -- lead Charles Burkhardt to write:

Feminists can make a feminist of Barbara Pym only rarely by her statements in her own voice; they will have to rely on her dramatizations, not her explications. The former are countless, of women's subservient role in the home, office, church, everywhere. Yet no matter how shrewd, they are a show of the state of things, not a shout against them.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ MS PYM 47, folio 10 verso.

¹³⁶ MS PYM 69, folio 4 recto. Unfortunately, Iris' textual incarnation never appears as sympathetic as the notebook entry would suggest.

¹³⁷ Burkhardt, *The Pleasure of Miss Pym*, 91.

Burkhart is right to declare that feminists who make a feminist of Pym do so on the evidence of the portrayal of women in her texts. Though these critics never find in Pym an unabashed ideologue, her fiction seems less ambiguous than her diaries concerning positive roles and expectations for women. Indeed, some critics, like Janice Rossen, do not hesitate to qualify Pym as a feminist on the basis of her fictional textual practice; according to Rossen, Pym was a "feminist writer in the 1950s before feminism became fashionable".¹³⁸ Barbara Brothers appears to agree, claiming that "[l]ike Woolf and other feminists, Pym chides novelists for not telling the truth about women's lives".¹³⁹ Others, though, arrive at the same conclusion by way of a more circuitous route. For example, Barbara Bowman admits that it "may sound odd to speak of [Pym's] heroines as subversive, since they are hardly radicals who protest loudly against the dominant culture's expectations", but feels that this protest does indeed take place on a "miniaturised scale". Bowman acknowledges that Pym's feminism is not the sort defined by radical emancipatory strategies, but is represented through dramatisations which pose a "heroine's perception of the discrepancy between her own and the dominant culture's assumptions against a male character's lack of perception". As Bowman concludes, Pym's ironic treatment of gender roles could be read as "a first step towards feminism", where a subordinate embarks on an initial retraining which will allow her "to see the bankruptcy of her own habitual roles".¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ Janice Rossen, "Introduction", *Independent Women* ed Janice Rossen, 2.

¹³⁹ Barbara Brothers, "Women Victimised by Fiction: Living and Loving in the Novels of Barbara Pym", *Twentieth-century Women Novelists* ed T. Staley (London: Macmillan, 1982), 63.

¹⁴⁰ Bowman, 85-6.

There is, however, one strongly dissenting voice among this 'second wave' of Pym's feminist critics, which belongs to Anne Wyatt-Brown, who warns of the dangers of reading Pym as a 'feminist before her time'. Wyatt-Brown states that Pym's novels "are not overtly feminist", further suggests that she "never developed a modern feminist perspective", and cites how "the novelist herself defined success as having a husband".¹⁴¹ The traces of 'feminism' others read into Pym's texts are what Wyatt-Brown calls

signs of an incompletely repressed female masochism, suppressed anger, and the kind of self-deprecating humour that marked the tradition of female writing in prefeminist days, and which has survived into the postfeminist era as well.¹⁴²

So while Wyatt-Brown rejects theories that make a feminist of Pym on the basis of her textual practice (and Wyatt-Brown specifically cites in her critique the illogic of Barbara Brothers' analysis) by overlooking less felicitous aspects of Pym's biography, she is willing to acknowledge a certain subversive flavour to Pym's novels figured in her representations of gender. Admitting that "being a female was central to [Pym's] experience", Wyatt-Brown concedes that,

[c]onservative or not, Pym's views on gender ought not to be ignored. They must be carefully evaluated not only to understand what forces inhibited the novelist in both her life and her writing but also to appreciate her astonishing insights into female behaviour and values, even though such conduct and principles do not conform with current attitudes.¹⁴³

Wyatt-Brown's thesis, then, clearly invites feminist speculations of Pym's treatment of gender as long as these do not attempt to create for Pym a political persona that simply did not exist. This, she argues, Pym's conflicted psyche could not support.

¹⁴¹ Wyatt-Brown, *Barbara Pym*, 2, 67, 2.

¹⁴² Wyatt-Brown, *Barbara Pym*, 103.

¹⁴³ Wyatt-Brown, *Barbara Pym*, 2, 3.

But perhaps the greatest detriment to efforts to co-opt Pym for feminists, what has made feminism sit so uncomfortably with Pym criticism in the past, concerns this eagerness to categorise. Those who label Pym a feminist, represented here by Janice Rossen and others, construct a political profile from the writer's depiction of women's experience while ignoring the evidence of her own sometimes discordant views on female success and fulfilment. Wyatt-Brown, on the other hand, who categorises Pym's writing as essentially non-feminist, often presents the totality of Pym's gender ethos through isolated comments or observations which cannot always account for the way in which Pym altered her views according to mood, influence, or experience.¹⁴⁴ Nor can Wyatt-Brown account for the way in which Pym's textual practice, which the critic willingly acknowledges is subversive in terms of its subjectification of gender, ideologically jibes with certain conceptions of a proto-feminist expression. Pym's 'feminist' critics might find themselves more advantageously positioned in relation to both her texts and its commentary, and better able to cope with the anxieties and tensions which exist in these two realms, by charting a course somewhere in between (in allying itself with both) the extremes which view Pym as either a feminist or a non-feminist. This paradoxical strategy reads the signs of Pym's own ideological ambivalence, recognising that while she was not opposed to feminism and often

¹⁴⁴ For example, Wyatt-Brown claims that Pym defined success as having a husband, and although Pym may have felt this at one time in her life, it is probable that she thought differently at other times. Certainly Pym had at least one positive role model in a single woman: her maternal aunt Janie Thomas, who never defined success in relation to men. As Hazel Holt says, "[a]ltogether she was a splendid example of how it was possible to be unmarried and still have a 'rich and full life'", *A Lot to Ask*, 10. Later in life, Pym undoubtedly realised that marriage did not offer the promise of fulfilment that she had once hoped, and came to define success in relation to her life as a published writer.

sympathised with its politics, she never consciously assumed a feminist identity. However, in examining Pym's subtly subversive treatment of gender in her novels, where her textual practice hints at an embryonic feminism, the strategy considers that Pym's writing could be deemed feminist according to its broadest definition. Pym may not have been a feminist though she often wrote like one.

But in an effort to come to terms with Pym's ideological instability, one must have a clear understanding of the terms and conditions of those activities described as 'feminist'. Rita Felski, in delimiting the range of feminism, adopts a formulation presented by Alison Jagger, "which defines as feminist all those forms of theory and practice that seek, no matter on what grounds and by what means, to end the subordination of women".¹⁴⁵ According to this specification, Pym could not be considered feminist mainly because of her unease with radicalism; her practice is to observe and detail, rather than to participate and effect change. And yet it is through her habit of observing and detailing the lives of women that those who call Pym a feminist do locate her politics. But there is a danger in this exercise of mistaking a 'woman-centred' narrative with a female protagonist for a 'feminist' text; if the representation of women's experience were the sole requirement for feminist credibility, one could make a feminist of Barbara Cartland as well as of Barbara Pym. With this in mind, Felski cites the argument of Rosalind Coward, who alleges "that it is just not possible to say that woman-centred writings have any necessary relationship to feminism"; Felski further echoes this by stating, "[i]t is clearly no longer possible to

¹⁴⁵ Felski, 13.

justify the value of feminist literature by simply asserting that it offers an authentic representation of the female subject".¹⁴⁶ Again, this restriction means Pym must be excluded from the feminist spectrum by those who see her chiefly -- like Michael Cotsell does -- as a "woman author, exploring one phase of women's experience".¹⁴⁷

Certainly all feminist critical assessments of Pym's work *must* account for her perspective as a woman writer, but they should also engage with the inherent social commentary that adumbrates her 'authentic representation of the female subject'. If one considers, for example, how Pym's novels render 'the war of genders', where she "transforms subordination into an acutely-felt sensibility"¹⁴⁸, it is then that one begins to see how these novels accord with Felski's requirements for feminist literature:

My definition of feminist literature is [...] a relatively broad one, which is intended to encompass all those texts that reveal a critical awareness of women's subordinate position and of gender as a problematic category, however this is expressed.¹⁴⁹

And, as Pym's novels "challenge any easy romanticism" (as Wyatt-Brown notes¹⁵⁰), and contend with women's subordination by effecting an initial retraining of the subordinate 'to see the bankruptcy of her own habitual roles' (as Bowman suggests), the novels further conform to Felski's formulation:

the defining feature of the feminist text is a recognition and rejection of the ideological basis of the traditional script of heterosexual romance characterized by female passivity, dependence, and subordination, and an attempt to develop an alternative narrative and symbolic framework within which female identity can be located.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁶ Felski, 14, 51.

¹⁴⁷ Cotsell, 7.

¹⁴⁸ Bowman, 91.

¹⁴⁹ Felski, 14.

¹⁵⁰ Wyatt-Brown, *Barbara Pym*, x.

¹⁵¹ Felski, 129.

So although Pym's novels do not offer 'programmatic hope that the relation of dominants to subordinates might change', they *do* provide her with a forum in which to play, therapeutically, with the traditional script of romance that so complicated her personal life. And in mutedly subverting (by providing alternatives to) the romantic form, she also tinkers with the conventions of gender. This is especially apparent in her treatment of food, for food is a feminist issue. This thesis provides an ideal focus within which to examine the food/gender dynamic, sorting through, without being overwhelmed by, the anxieties and tensions evident in Pym's texts, where she uses food to address certain ideological conflicts. As Maggie Lane eloquently points out with respect to her study on Austen and food,

[w]ithout going so far as to claim Jane Austen as a proto-feminist, the act of focusing on food in the novels supports a feminist reading, if only because female destiny, one way or another, is and always has been intimately connected with food: providing it, avoiding it, being shaped by it body and soul.¹⁵²

Without necessarily claiming Pym as a feminist, either, or at least going no further than Larkin does in jokingly referring to her as "an early libber"¹⁵³, this study examines the way in which she exposes the cultural myths of food (uncovering the realities behind appearances) and deconstructs symbols (in particular, replacing the symbols of woman-as-food with woman-as-individual). In so doing, it registers the way in which Pym grapples with certain 'feminist-sensitive' issues like female subordination, the problematics of gender, and the inadequacies of traditional romantic narratives. And without trying to make a feminist icon of Pym, this study suggests her textual practice merits her inclusion within a more broadly-determined feminist canon.

¹⁵² Lane, xiv. She adds, "[a]ll these modes bear some relationship to the dominant male desires of a patriarchal system; while male attitudes towards eating inevitably impinge on the lives of the women around them".

¹⁵³ Weld, 194.

A 'Strenuous Task': Men and Feminism

Besides having expressed surprise that feminists had failed to claim Pym in the past,

Penelope Lively has also noted that

there is a whole thesis to be written one day (by a woman, and typed by a man), on the significance of food in Barbara Pym's novels: all those propitiatory meals, all those carefully devised menus, the selection of dishes in restaurants -- and who pays for them.¹⁵⁴

It is pure serendipity that this study manages to combine two of the recommendations offered by Lively, in that it comprises a feminist reclamation of Pym in the form of a thesis treating the significance of food in her novels, for the study was devised before its author had encountered Lively's commentary. Nevertheless, the critic's support for this undertaking is encouraging but for one obvious incongruity: the author of this study is *not* a woman. Indeed, readers will not fail to detect the irony of the male critic 'rescuing' Pym from the imprisonment of traditionalist masculinist discourse for the benefit of feminist literary scholarship. The situation's political sensitivity demands the answer to a question: how does the Pymian male critic -- even a self-identified feminist one -- 'recover' Pym without seeming like her new 'knight-in-shining-armour'?

Additionally, this question re-introduces the notion of the Gallopien *and*, for the concept of 'men and feminism' truly does represent an effort to connect the historically indifferent. The strain of this relationship can often be located in the difficulty some practitioners have in choosing an appropriate connective (men *and* feminism? men *in* feminism? men *as* feminists?) to describe their activities, one that best reflects the compatibility of these two substantives while avoiding any posturing

¹⁵⁴ Lively, "Recent Fiction", 77.

that could be read as political naiveté or critical imperialism. There is no doubt that male involvement in feminism is built upon a history of contention, while it continues to be viewed as controversial in some circles. And yet the innocuous *and* (as the conjunction of choice) linking men and feminism can indicate the projection of a possible fruitful union provided certain strategies are adopted.

As just one manifestation of male feminism, male subscription to feminist literary critical theories gained currency in the late 1970s, though the practice remained marginal. However, when Terry Eagleton, a prominent academic with a reputation as a materialist critic, produced a 'feminist' critical inquiry in the early '80s entitled *The Rape of Clarissa*¹⁵⁵, male feminist criticism went mainstream. Other notable figures, like Jonathan Culler, J. Hillis Miller, Wayne Booth, Robert Scholes, and Christopher Norris also waded into the feminist literary critical pool, willingly engaging with feminist theories yet remaining aloof from their political associations.

Not surprisingly, feminists reacted negatively to what they viewed as critical expediency, labelling the actions of these men 'bandwagonning' and accusing them of critical imperialism. Male feminism's most celebrated critic, Elaine Showalter, then entered into a pitched battle with Eagleton upon publication of her caustic essay, "Critical Cross-Dressing; Male Feminism and the Woman of the Year".¹⁵⁶ Here,

¹⁵⁵ Terry Eagleton, *The Rape of Clarissa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

¹⁵⁶ Elaine Showalter, "Critical Cross-Dressing; Male Feminism and the Woman of the Year", *Men in Feminism* ed Alice Jardine and Paul Smith (New York and London: Methuen, 1987), 116-132.

Showalter admitted that the times (the 1980s) were ripe for men to begin listening to feminists and learn the language feminist critics employed, but warned feminists to be suspicious of emergent male interests in a critical discourse that had previously suffered neglect and indifference at men's hands. As far as Showalter was concerned, these 'phallic feminists' merely borrowed from feminist critical practice without risking the adoption of a feminist politics, assuming its discourse like items of clothing to wear for a time and then discard. As 'critical cross-dressers', early male feminists marked trends within the academy, updated their *curricula vitae*, and, more seriously, altered feminist critical practices to suit their own needs. When, for example, Eagleton talked about how the author, Samuel Richardson, embarked upon the "production of a new kind of male subject", how, in a "recuperative gesture", he raided "the resources of the feminine to 'modernize' male dominance", Showalter saw the male feminist's ideological project blatantly analogised.¹⁵⁷ Eagleton said of Richardson that he had "grasped the point that the so-called 'woman question' [was] nothing of the kind -- that the root of the sexual problem [was] men", and Showalter observed, too, how early male feminists avoided addressing the 'woman question' in directing attention instead towards men and male-centred issues.

Showalter's thoughts here regarding male 'raids' on feminism previewed those expressed by other feminist commentators whose essays were published along with hers.¹⁵⁸ There was a near unanimous feeling among them that 'critical cross-dressing'

¹⁵⁷ Eagleton, 96.

¹⁵⁸ For a further examination of reactions to the male feminist phenomenon, see the collection of essays referred to here: *Men in Feminism* ed Alice Jardine and Paul Smith; see also, Janet Todd, 118-134; *Engendering Men: The Question of Male*

was the first assault in a systematic move towards the colonisation of the feminine, while various representatives from the movement's diverse ideological collective agreed that appropriation, penetration, infiltration, and, ultimately, impersonation were the only possible relations for men to feminism.¹⁵⁹ Even Stephen Heath, a noted feminist 'sympathiser', rejected the concept of male feminism, stating:

This is, I believe, the most any man can do today: to learn and so to try to write or talk or act in response to feminism, and so to try not in any way to be anti-feminist, supportive of the old oppressive structures. Any more, any notion of writing a feminist book or being a feminist, is a myth, a male imaginary with the reality of appropriation and domination right behind.¹⁶⁰

Luckily, Heath's was not the final word on men and feminism, otherwise men would still be skirting around its issues today, offering fetishistic sympathy yet remaining essentially inactive. Feminists like Showalter chose instead to offer advice and guidance to men who were serious about both feminist politics and its literary critical offshoots, inviting dialogue and encouraging proactivity. Showalter chided Jonathan Culler for doing precisely what Heath endorsed, which was to refrain from fully committing to feminism, presenting himself rather "as an analyst of feminist critical work"; she added that, "[f]or the most part, Culler places himself outside of, although sympathetic to, feminist reading".¹⁶¹ What Showalter wanted instead was for

Feminism ed Joseph Boone and Michael Cadden (London and New York: Routledge, 1990); *Women Respond to the Men's Movement* ed Kay Leigh Hagan (San Francisco: HarperSanfrancisco, 1992); *Men Doing Feminism* ed Tom Digby (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

¹⁵⁹ Interestingly, the use of a seemingly harmless connective word like *in* ('men in feminism') was seen as a synecdoche for the assaultive nature of men's relationship to feminism: men *into* feminism (because it is trendy); men breaking and entering *into* feminist literary criticism (because they must possess and control); men rummaging around *in* women's closets (because they must don a costume which will disguise their power).

¹⁶⁰ Stephen Heath, "Male Feminism", *Men in Feminism*, 9

men to embrace feminist politics and therefore to read *as* feminists, which, though not unproblematic, "has the important aspect of offering male readers a way to produce feminist criticism that avoids female impersonation".¹⁶² Writing just a few years later, feminist literary historian Janet Todd borrowed from Showalter's metaphorical closet in suggesting that men imagine "costumes and modalities for themselves". Todd reminded all feminist literary critical practitioners -- male or female -- that the feminist label accompanied a certain consciousness attained through struggle and commitment, and that feminist literary criticism was not simply another way to discuss books; she reiterated, "[n]o one should enter [feminism] without knowing that he or she takes up a political position".¹⁶³ And Alice Jardine, another feminist commentator, concurred, stating that what she required from men was work, collaboration, and commitment. Refreshingly, Jardine outlined clearly how this could be achieved: by abandoning the use of theory that was politically naive; by men reading, teaching, and writing of and about women's writing; through male sponsorship of women students; in the recognition of a debt to feminism in male critical writing; through the discontinuation of reductionism and an avoidance of 'how-to's; by men critiquing other men on the issues of feminism; and finally, in the cessation of male reaction to feminism and an embarkation upon active feminism.¹⁶⁴

By the 1990s, male feminists were responding practically in ways that affirmed Jardine's recommendations, and Joseph Boone, a self-identified male feminist, offered

¹⁶¹ Showalter, "Critical Cross-Dressing", 126.

¹⁶² Showalter, "Critical Cross-Dressing", 125-6.

¹⁶³ Todd, 134.

¹⁶⁴ Jardine, 60-1.

further encouragement at this time in the form of a four-part plan. He urged men to identify with feminism and called on them to assume willingly a 'feminist' label; he suggested they should make present their own oppressive structures for critique; he invoked Cixous' name, when she declared "that men still have everything to say about their sexuality", in asking men to forge self-definitions through feminism; and, finally, he echoed Jardine in exhorting men to share ideas with each other, to form a collective as feminist men in opposition to a traditional patriarchal order.¹⁶⁵ Boone's political bent, encrypted within his own critical practice, provides tangible proof that the framework outlined by critics as a corrective to early male 'feminist' endeavours is both realistic and sustainable, revealing how the efforts of contemporary male feminists can add to the diverse and often conflicting ideological positions which, combined, characterise the feminist movement. And while men's and women's unique gender experiences decree that male feminism must be different, Boone reminds us that male feminism need "not always be *the same* as feminist practice, [as long as it] remains in contiguity with its politics".¹⁶⁶

One way of determining the political integrity of male feminists -- indeed, of feminists in general -- is through this process of self-definition and self-critique

¹⁶⁵ Joseph Boone, "Of Me(n) and Feminism: Who(se) is the Sex that Writes?", *Engendering Men*, 23-4. In another germane reference from Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa", published in *New French Feminisms*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle Courtivron, she writes: "I write woman: woman must write woman. And man, man. So only oblique consideration will be found here of man; it's up to him to say where his masculinity and femininity are at: this will concern us once men have opened their eyes and seen themselves clearly", 247. Cixous also said in "Sorties", "[p]hallocentrism is the enemy. Of *everyone*. Men stand to lose by it, differently but as seriously as women", 96.

¹⁶⁶ Joseph Boone and Michael Cadden, "Introduction", *Engendering Men*, 23.

through feminism. This imperative, the ultimate link between the personal and the political, induces the male critic, especially, to consider how feminist issues affect his selfhood, his masculinity. It forces men to confront the nature of their relationship to various ideological, sociological, and psychological structures which support a traditional matrix of power. In direct response to this, Boone asks male feminists to consider the following:

To what extent do we choose to disguise, or not, our commitments to feminism? How do we sometimes take advantage of our born status as 'men' to negotiate the treacherous process of establishing a professional identity and continuing to exist within the limitations of our specific institutional circumstances ... and then where do we leave our female allies?¹⁶⁷

A fairly recent trend among feminist critics figures personality or autobiography as criticism in order to permit the observing critic-subject to place him- or herself consciously in relation to oppressive social structures. Nancy K. Miller, a principal advocate of this strategy, posits that self-representation in criticism can serve as political representativity, referring, as is done here, to the example of Boone's essay, "Of Me(n) and Feminism".¹⁶⁸ Another proponent explains that the opening of a register of personality is designed to destabilise those critics who "inhabit a secure, objectified, third-person mode that protects them from having to be self-aware".¹⁶⁹ What this means for the male critic -- whose usual critical detachment has saved him in the past from positioning himself in relation to political realities about which he

¹⁶⁷ Boone, 24.

¹⁶⁸ Nancy K. Miller, *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 2. Miller admits a bias regarding autobiography as criticism, confessing that "maybe personal criticism is for women only. Maybe women do it better", 25.

¹⁶⁹ Nicole Ward Jouve, *White Woman Speaks With Forked Tongue: Criticism as Autobiography* (London: Routledge, 1990), 1.

theorises -- is that he can now place himself in a way that accounts for the significance of feminism to his work while he also acknowledges the specificity of his gender.

So in an effort to articulate the importance of feminism to my work, as a male critic presenting a feminist study of Pym, I engage here in some personal speculation of my own, consciously keeping it brief in order to minimise stylistic awkwardness and to avoid preciosity. My allegiance to feminist politics, which is neither naive nor opportunistic, arises from factors that are partly generational, partly cultural, and wholly personal. For example, I endorse Boone's thesis that there now exists a whole generation of male critics who have been educated in feminism, immersed in its political dynamism and theoretical sophistication. And I, along with others, have also assumed a role as instructor at times, tutoring other young women and men of the academy in feminism.¹⁷⁰ Though we form part of a newer generation of feminists who have not experienced the apprenticeship of the 'grass roots' movement, we are able to engage in the current political debate which helps facilitate feminism's evolution.

Furthermore, as a Canadian, my political identity has been partly moulded by a national pastime of self-definition and -critique, which can (rather curiously) promote the assumption of feminist ideologies. In a nation where the post-colonial condition is profoundly nuanced, where debates concerning culture, ethnicity, regionalism, and

¹⁷⁰ Boone alleges that we must "account for the generational factor in order to measure with more discrimination the multiplicities of men's relation to feminism", and, "[m]oreover, if the presence of feminist educated men makes a difference, so too, potentially, does its correlative: young women in the academy whose education in feminism has at least partially been shaped by men with feminist interests, both in their lives and their scholarship", 22-3.

language are deeply entrenched, people tend to cultivate a sense of 'otherness'. In the past, this act of identifying as the 'other' has been exercised through ties with various colonial powers, where distinctions are made first through allying the self and then in re-defining it. Increasingly, though, Canadians have felt the imperatorial weight of our monolithic American neighbours whose overwhelming influence in the areas of politics, business and trade, and, most especially, in media and popular culture, pose the single greatest threat to an autonomous Canadian identity. So despite our national diversity, always subject to domestic scrutiny, we are bound together as a 'feminised' culture, linked through unity of oppression. We determine our identities as Canadians by difference, in that we are *not* Americans. And the fight for cultural selfhood has its parallel in the struggle for sexual emancipation; Kristeva comments on the connection:

the women's struggle cannot be divorced from revolutionary struggle, or anti-imperialism. The issues that are crucial to [feminist] practice involve the notion of the subject, its fragmentation, the inscription of heterogeneity, difference.¹⁷¹

In this sense, the concerns of cultural self-determination resemble those supporting some feminist ideology (though not all Canadians draw this analogy -- and nor is the parallel uniquely Canadian). But someone like me, indoctrinated within a culture of 'otherness', inculcated with a sensitivity towards issues of subjectivity, separation, and difference, educated in feminism, can only be receptive to the anti-imperialist struggle feminism represents.

This receptivity is manifest, for example, in my reading of Pym as compared to readings by other male critics. From the start I found that my response to Pym's texts had more in common with readings by women -- namely feminists -- than it did with

¹⁷¹ Julia Kristeva, "Woman Can Never Be Defined", *New French Feminisms*, 140.

the various critical assessments offered by other men. Though all of Pym's male critics view Pym's work within a tradition of women's writing, analysing her portrayal of women's experience, none of them risks examining her from a feminist perspective as I do. Indeed, their 'sensitive male' critical approaches cannot entirely obscure messages of superiority conveyed in readings which suggest that the author's weak-kneed feminism (when it is even registered) is essentially non-threatening, that her mild sexual-political satire does not tax conventional masculinist critical faculties. Robert Liddell, for example, steadfastly neglects the role of ideology in Pym's texts, though he concedes that like all novelists, she expresses to some extent her ideas about life through her fiction, preferring 'some ends, some means'. But Liddell also protests that Pym is incapable of psychological complexity and in an effort to shield (or shape) her reputation, he trivialises her artistic endeavour:

In general, she has exhibited the lifestyle of more or less excellent women of the middle-class, most of them with some degree of culture and none of them an advocate for any cause -- their morals and values are mainly right.¹⁷²

Dale Salwak, on the other hand, finds some evidence of ideology, of advocacy in Pym's texts, but lauds her approach at the expense of a stigmatised feminist discourse:

Her novels are also distinguished by a low-key but nevertheless cutting treatment of assumptions of masculine superiority and other sexist notions, all this well in advance of the women's movement and without the rhetoric that mars so much feminist fiction.¹⁷³

And Robert Emmet Long observes that feminists have ignored Pym because her "women depend wholly upon men for their self-identity", stating that her characters have no 'feminine consciousness'; still, Long claims the novels do display a "feminine intelligence" -- an undefined phrase he employs more than once.¹⁷⁴ From the security

¹⁷² Liddell, "A Success Story, 183-4.

¹⁷³ Dale Salwak, "Introduction", *Barbara Pym: A Reference Guide* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1991), xi-xii.

of an objectified, third-person mode which bars them from self-awareness, these men comment authoritatively on women's writing, women's experience, and the politics of femininity and feminism, reminding one of Virginia Woolf's statement, "[w]omen have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size".¹⁷⁵

Larkin may speak for such men when he writes, "Miss Pym's novels may look like 'women's books', but no man can read them and ever be the same again"¹⁷⁶, and yet his own well-documented misogyny -- only two years after her death Pym's name featured in a pornographic limerick he penned for a male friend¹⁷⁷ -- confirms that his reading of her had failed to change him in any meaningful way. In reality, Larkin's testimonial devalues texts that *are* 'women's books' -- by and about women, satisfying a mainly female readership -- by suggesting only their wider, deeper perceptions can appeal to men. This fetishising of Pym by Larkin and others needs redressing, best effected through a re-politicisation of Pym as a writer of 'women's books'. And though this study is written by a man, and therefore different from one with similar concerns that might be written by a woman, it forms part of this feminist recovery of Pym in exploring the politics of her portrayal of the concerns of gendered existence.

¹⁷⁴ Long, 215. 'Feminine intelligence' features on pages 31 and 201.

¹⁷⁵ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 41.

¹⁷⁶ Philip Larkin, "The World of Barbara Pym", *Times Literary Supplement* 11 March 1977: 260.

¹⁷⁷ The limerick reads: "The chances are certainly slim/ Of finding in Barbara Pym/ (I speak with all deference)/ The faintest of reference/ To what in our youth we called quim", Thwaite, 665.

Chapter 2: The Devastating Francis Came In Eating a Banana:

Pym and the Psychology of Food

I was on pins awaiting the arrival of the devastating Francis -- at about 11. he came. The same fascinating creature. Actually asked me about Oxford -- thought my face looked more debauched! Stayed up quite a long time and then went up to the bathroom. Francis came in eating a banana -- an amazingly dissipated [sic] sight. We tried to put the skin down his neck and into his pocket but [word crossed out] and made some noise in doing it!¹

When Barbara Pym recorded this diary entry (2 January 1932) she had already spent one term at St Hilda's College, Oxford, where she began to construct an alter-ego whom she referred to as 'Sandra'. She inscribed the name on numerous personal possessions, including notebooks, and, according to Hazel Holt, Sandra was meant to refer to "the more dashing aspects of her character" (*VPE*: 11). But Sandra's manner was often misinterpreted, and Pym complained rather disingenuously that some of the young men at Oxford "teased [her] about [her] appalling reputation".² So while Sandra may have been designed to be chic and sophisticated, she also gave the impression that she was 'fast' (in Holt's view), as evidenced by the entry above which details an event relating to the current object of Pym's obsession, a young man named Francis, brother of one of her school friends. Her interest in Francis is characteristic of her experience with the opposite sex at this time in her life, marked by his sudden appearance in two of her diary entries and by his equally precipitous absence from further ones, to be replaced by other similarly 'fascinating' creatures who captured Pym's fickle fancy. The style in which she frames her romantic compulsions and the context in which the object of her desire is figured are also typical, indicated by a

¹ MS PYM 101, folio 1 verso.

² Holt, *A Lot to Ask*, 28-9.

gushing school-girl manner hinting at deeper, sublimated inclinations, which paradoxically appears both natural -- in her nervousness ('pins') in waiting for Francis -- and affected -- through her guise as someone pleased to have her face described as 'more debauched' after the experience of just one term at Oxford. Pym's language is overblown, too, in that she sees Francis as both 'devastating' and 'fascinating' while his actions reveal his 'dissipation', a term Holt notes was one of Pym's favourites from this time.³ Any pretence to a bohemian sophistication affected through the use of such rich language and through reference to the corrupting influence of Oxford are undone, however, by the pathos of Pym's misspelling of this favoured word as 'disippated'.

Tensions which highlight differences between the conflicting identities of the seasoned, glamorous Sandra and the immature, schoolgirl Barbara become even more evident in the subverted sexual-play with Francis' banana skin. This nearly goes down his neck and into his pocket while details of its final outcome are censored by Pym herself, who scratches out a word in the diary before concluding the entry with reference to the noise they made in having their fun.⁴ Francis may enter the bathroom looking devastating and dissipated but ends up merely looking ridiculous, hardly an object of desire at all. Hilary Pym remembers that Barbara and her school friends were precocious and more preoccupied with men than their peers, recalling that they engaged in "advanced talk about sex"⁵, which no doubt fostered the seemingly daring

³ Holt, *A Lot to Ask*, 22. For some reason Holt chooses to correct this word in her citation of this passage in the biography.

⁴ Holt also corrects this part of the passage in the biography, choosing not to make note of Pym's efforts at self-editing. Holt's rendition simply reads, "We tried to put the skin down his neck and into his pocket and made some noise in doing it!". *A Lot to Ask*, 22.

behaviour she indulged in with Francis. But this sex talk formed part of a pose, for Pym responded to male overtures with prudery and inhibition despite obvious efforts to attract men's attention. Her diaries reveal that she held naive hopes for, and unrealistic expectations about, 'Love', and was disappointed when the men whom she imagined as romantic heroes *exceeded* her expectations; Sandra may have been led by desire, but Barbara preferred it when her desires remained in the realm of fantasy.

Indeed, it would appear that Barbara feared to tread where Sandra's more unabashed desires took her. While Sandra appeared sexually *au fait*, wrongly leading Henry Harvey (for whom Pym was to develop an obsession while at Oxford, creating for him a romantic identity to match her own, referring to him as both 'Gabriel' and 'Lorenzo') to believe that she was "common property"⁶, Barbara was romantically inclined but sexually reticent. Outwardly, she enjoyed the game of romance, as shown by her affair with Rupert Gleadow, Harvey's predecessor, in her first year at Oxford (soon after the banana incident with Francis). She noted how she "loved stealing glances at Rupert's profile -- and was very thrilled by him" at the cinema, but once he "was very Theocritean and loving", she "got a wee bit sick of it", though she "tried to please him" (*VPE*: 18). On another occasion when Rupert sought to convince her that theirs should be "a love affair in the fullest sense"⁷, Pym recorded the event in her diary, typically punctuated with a memory of food:

Today [15 Oct 1932] I must always remember I suppose. I went to tea with Rupert (and ate a pretty colossal one) and he with all his charm eloquence and masculine wiles persuaded [according to Pym's pagination, one leaf is torn out here].⁸

⁵ Wyatt-Brown, *Barbara Pym*, 22.

⁶ Holt, *A Lot to Ask*, 48.

⁷ Holt, *A Lot to Ask*, 35.

Though compelled to document this painful event ('Today I must always remember I suppose'), Pym still used various techniques to alter her recollection of it. The most radical of these was to tear the page out of her diary, though it is likely that this did not occur until many years later, while another was to rework the event in fiction. But it is the remembrance of food, initially meant to function only as an *aide-mémoire* for this drama, that survives instead as its primary image. We know from his correspondence to her that Rupert's masculine wiles failed to overcome Barbara's feminine virtue, for he refers to her "still lasting immunity"⁹, but this realisation only serves to render more significant Pym's resistance to the power of his masculine charm and eloquence and her fixation on food in the face of his desirous persistence.

In speculating about the frigidity which undercut Pym's sexual bravado, Holt sees a connection between the author and a character from *Crampton Hodnet*, which Pym began writing in 1939. For this character, Barbara Bird, "passion was cerebral and romantic, the *idea* of Love rather than the actuality".¹⁰ Having fallen in love with her tutor, Francis Cleveland, her physical detachment causes him to wonder, "Could it be [...] that she was not quite what she seemed?", while he later rounds on her: "You look so amorous and really you're just a cold fish" (*CH*: 177). Holt says, "[t]he phrase comes through as one that someone had actually used" on Pym herself¹¹, suggesting through the evidence of this example that Pym employed her writing to

⁸ MS PYM 101, folio 44 verso.

⁹ Holt, *A Lot to Ask*, 35.

¹⁰ Holt, *A Lot to Ask*, 48. It is interesting to note that the protagonists here are also named 'Barbara' and 'Francis'.

¹¹ Holt, *A Lot to Ask*, 48.

revise the past and inoculate herself against the pain of difficult memories (what Holt calls Pym's habit of "writing things out of her life"¹²). Wyatt-Brown, too, comments upon this same tendency, also linking this fictional scene to the 'colossal tea' incident. She claims that the Barbara Bird/Francis Cleveland dramatisation, a conversion of "Gleadow's unsuccessful seduction into a comically portrayed fiasco", is key to our understanding of the importance of this event to Pym personally, while it forms part of her "compensatory technique of converting emotional disasters into novels".¹³ And finally, both biographers allude to a connection between Pym's own character and that of Barbara Bird, the 'amorous cold fish', thus supporting our notion of Pym's own ambiguity, resident in her fascination for the simultaneously thrilling and threatening.

But if it is true that Pym used writing to render the past more palatable, then it is also the case that early in life she began to employ food in a similar way: food helped her to efface moments of pain, to recall periods of contentedness, and, most significantly, to direct her desire. Food's compensatory value meant that it factored heavily -- as writing did -- in Pym's emotional life, while both food and writing came to represent her only true 'requited loves'. So when Wyatt-Brown claims that Pym's juvenilia reveals "the young author was already worried about whether she could reconcile her creative instincts with her love of food and comfort"¹⁴, it may be argued that Pym did find a way of reconciling these drives, which was to combine food *and* writing as a way of framing desire. Indeed, the way in which food figures in her

¹² Holt, *A Lot to Ask*, 232.

¹³ Wyatt-Brown, *Barbara Pym*, 29-30, 28.

¹⁴ Wyatt-Brown, *Barbara Pym*, 23.

consciousness and is manifested in her texts habitually speaks to, and of, desire. And if, as Jane Gallop says, the scene of writing is where an author's desire is staged and one finds there an attempt of a desire to speak itself¹⁵, in Pym's texts it is the conjunction of the scene of eating *at* the scene of writing that marks the location of her texts' unconscious, and it is through a discourse of food that Pym essays the articulation -- or, even more appropriately, the deferral -- of desire.

She is thrilled, for example, by the 'amazingly dissipated' sight of Francis entering the bathroom eating a banana, for the image is a provocative one, heavy with sexual tension. Her favoured term, 'dissipated', offers its own sexual implications as it may mean both 'licentious' and 'promiscuous', while the phallic significance of Francis' banana is unmistakable, its signature shape the embodiment of his sexual potential. It is equally typical of Pym, though, even at this early stage in her development as a writer with a facility for high comedy, and as one who harboured deeply conflicting notions regarding the manifestation of the romantic through a confrontation with the sexual, to seek refuge from sexual tension in humour. By re-figuring what may be seen as a primitive desire into a culturally acceptable expression, she defuses the potential threat of the banana through its reduction to a flaccid relic used as a weapon against Francis himself, in being thrust down his neck and into his pocket. Like Anna's banana in the satirical *Freud's Own Cookbook*, which is neither sublimated into talk nor reduced to its symbolic significance, the latent puritanism in Pym which leads

¹⁵ Gallop, 111.

her to deconstruct, and ultimately to reject, the sexual symbolism of Francis' banana is grounded in a naive and hopeful belief that "[s]ometimes a banana is just a banana".¹⁶

In the case of the Gleadow seduction episode, Pym's memory of food stands as an affective testimony to her anxiety and indicates how her desires differed from Rupert's. Did he ply her with food in an effort to breach her defences? Did she consume an inordinate amount of food in an attempt to deflect his advances? Or is it that Pym's unconscious finds in food a safe repository for, and haven from, her own monstrous desires -- desires both thrilling and threatening? While it may seem that Pym treats irreverently the metaphorical evidence of the other's desire in employing the skin of his banana as a weapon against Francis, her significant appetite for food as recorded in the 'colossal tea' scene appears to serve as a metonym of her own desire. Eating food (and later writing about it) provides Pym -- the original 'amorous cold fish' -- with a means to avoid confronting the realities of her fantasies and fears. In food, she condenses her own sexual preoccupations while displacing the sometimes overwhelming preoccupations of others.¹⁷

¹⁶ James Hillman and Charles Boer, eds. *Freud's Own Cookbook* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1985), 63. In this comic cookbook, inspired by Freud's notion of 'oral eroticism' and featuring passages from both his public and private writings where food and/or eating is mentioned, the authors have devised recipes that pun on Freudian psychoanalytic concepts and the names of Freud's colleagues and patients listed in his casenotes. In the text which accompanies the recipe for 'Bananas O', Anna O. expresses an interest in a banana she spies in Dr Breuer's lunch pail, having complained earlier that she is unable to eat. He urges her: "Come with me to the kitchen, Anna O., and bring that banana. I think I know a way to prepare it that will not only satisfy your non-existent appetite, but forever cure you of those other female gripes too", 62.

¹⁷ The terms 'displacement' and 'condensation' represent the Freudian equivalents to 'metaphor' and 'metonymy'.

This sublimation of desire, symptomatic of an abject psyche, suggests that Pym's life is circumscribed not only by *desire* as such, as this is characterised by Julia Kristeva, but even more by *exclusion*. The abject individual -- who, in the simplest terms, might be said to act upon withdrawal -- is bound by *exclusion*, or taboo, and this prohibition can often be linked to both the dietary and the sexual.¹⁸ In this way, abjection serves as a control mechanism regulating involuntary cultural participation, wherein an eating disorder (as exhibited by Marcia Ivory, for example, in *Quartet in Autumn*) qualifies as the abject's most extreme form of expression.¹⁹ Pym's own complex responses to these contingencies of life, the nutritive and the sexual, which, when considered in relation to her bent for the ambiguous ("abjection is above all ambiguity"²⁰) and tendency toward sublimation (through sublimation, the abject is kept under control; it "is edged with the sublime"²¹), attest to the way in which the abject defined her life, modifying both her behavioural and creative drives. Indeed, it is through the subjectification of food and the sublimation of desire that Pym may be viewed as a 'writer of the abject'.

The Hungry Self, The Writing Self, The Abject Self

This phenomenon of the abject (enacted through writing, the nutritive, and the sexual, and predicated upon ambiguity), especially as it informs issues of subjectivity and gender in her writing, is thus ideally suited to an analysis of Pym's textual personae.

¹⁸ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 6.

¹⁹ Issues relating to female eating disorders will be considered elsewhere in this chapter, while the case of Marcia Ivory will be considered in more detail in Ch 3.

²⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 9.

²¹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 11.

The conceptualisation of a gendered self in writing necessarily demands a familiarity with an "historically specific set of interrelations between socioeconomic conditions and ideological and cultural processes"²², as well as the translation of a biological register into a social one. But while issues relating to sexuality and sexual pleasure are central to contemporary theories of female identity (Cixous asks, for example, "What is feminine sexual pleasure, where does it take place, how is it inscribed at the level of her body, of her unconscious? And then how is it put into writing?²³), food, the *other* part of the anatomy of the abject, is equally crucial to a formulation of female identity (we recall Maggie Lane's thesis that women's destiny is and always has been intimately connected with food). And if, as Alison Light says,

literary discourse permits and embodies an imaginary reformulation and re-definition of 'the social', whose selectivity betrays both the conscious and unconscious desires of its subjects, then these desires may be seen to be differently organised and expressed for women and for men,²⁴

while a woman's literal and figurative obsession with food may be seen as a product of that selectivity. Kim Chernin also posits that food is "the principal way the problems of being come to expression in women's lives", where "an obsession with food is an attempt to provide a ceremonial form by which women can enter culture".²⁵ And Mary Anne Schofield, in writing of food's social role in light of "these turbulent decades of self re-evaluation and definition", observes that

[f]ood takes on a transformative function as women progress to and extend themselves beyond traditional roles and ideas of womanhood. It is a process that, in the final analysis, leads to a new civilization and identity, but it is a process that is oftentimes ambivalent, even contradictory.²⁶

²² Felski, 60.

²³ Cixous, "Sorties", 95.

²⁴ Light, "Writing Fictions: Femininity and the 1950s", 146-7.

²⁵ Kim Chernin, *The Hungry Self: Women, Eating and Identity* (London: Virago, 1985), xi, 166.

²⁶ Mary Anne Schofield, "Spinster's Fare: Rites of Passage in Anita Brookner's

The lens of the abject, then, with its focus on food, sex, and ambiguity, provides an ideal tool for examining the defining contradictions evident in Pym's personal and public texts, as viewed through eating (or loss of appetite), in desire (or withdrawal from it), and in the very act of writing itself (or in her rejection as a writer).

Writing, or, more specifically, literature is key to Kristeva's conception of the abject, for she states that literature operates as the abject's "privileged signifier", representing "the ultimate coding of our crises, of our most intimate and serious apocalypses".²⁷ 'Compulsion' is also part of Kristeva's formulation, and this, too, means that the abject is especially resonant for this study of Pym, whom Holt describes as a "born writer" and a "writer born with a unique view of life".²⁸ This qualification, Pym as 'born writer', has less to do with claims in favour of Pym's literary genius (for even she rejected comparisons of her work to that of another writer of true genius, Jane Austen²⁹) than it does with her compulsion to write under any circumstance, and with her effort to resolve the contradictions and relieve the

Fiction", *Cooking by the Book: Food in Literature and Culture* ed Mary Anne Schofield (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1990), 61-2.

²⁷ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 208.

²⁸ Holt, *A Lot to Ask*, ix. This could comprise part of Holt's effort to present a feminised, 'depoliticised' Pym: a 'born' writer works instinctively rather than through the agency of an acquired consciousness or intellect. I employ Holt's designation here only insofar as it appears that Pym conceived of herself as a writer from an early age.

²⁹ Pym notes in her radio essay, "Finding a Voice", how "[c]ritics discussing my work sometimes tentatively mention these great names [Austen and Trollope], mainly, I think, because I tend to write about the same kind of people and society as they did, although, of course, the ones I write about live in the twentieth century. But what novelist of today would *dare* to *claim* that she was influenced by such masters of our craft? Certainly all who read and love Jane Austen may *try* to write with the same economy of language, even *try* to look at their characters with her kind of detachment, but that is as far as any 'influence' could go", (CS: 411).

tensions of her private life through writing. Her designation as a born writer, then, revealed from an early age when she always pictured herself as an author, suggests writing was both a serious and intimate activity for her and partly explains the power behind her determination to continue writing despite the monumental disinterest of publishers, when she was experiencing the most profound feelings of abjection.

In a diary entry from 1965, when she was still trying to secure a publisher for the much-rejected *An Unsuitable Attachment*, Pym noted:

Last night it came back [from Faber] but with a nice letter from Charles Monteith. Now I feel as if I shall never write again, though perhaps I will eventually. Rather a relief to feel that I don't have to flog myself to finish the present one since probably nothing I write could be acceptable now. (*VPE*: 330)

But Pym did manage to finish another novel, *The Sweet Dove Died*, which was also presented to a number of publishers without success, so by the time she began work on the manuscript for what would eventually become *Quartet in Autumn*, she really had little hope of being published again yet felt compelled to persevere. Pym wrote to Philip Larkin about the novel in 1976, telling him that it was "slowly progressing but I don't seem inclined to hurry as there seems so little chance of getting it published"³⁰, and wrote to Henry Harvey later that same year: "Novel writing is a kind of private pleasure, even if nothing comes of it in worldly terms".³¹ According to Holt, by 1976 Pym had finally and "painfully achieved a philosophical attitude" towards both her work and her status as a writer -- fifteen years after the publication of her last novel.³² But by 1978, as she came to enjoy her status as a published writer again, Pym felt safe

³⁰ Holt, *A Lot to Ask*, 245.

³¹ Holt, *A Lot to Ask*, 250.

³² Holt, *A Lot to Ask*, 250.

enough to quote Ivy Compton-Burnett on the subject of writing and a reading public: "Most of the pleasure of making a book would go if it held nothing to be shared by other people. I would write for a dozen people... but I would not write for no one", to which Pym adds: "[t]his is what I feel myself" (CS: 414).

Some of Pym's writerly drive, which would lead her to write for only a dozen people, arises from her desire to present others with her 'unique view of life' based on her compulsive habit of processing through a literary mill things seen or overheard. However, her tendency to exploit her art as a compensatory vehicle to revise the past suggests that it truly represents the ultimate coding of her crises, of her most intimate and serious apocalypses. And the other 'selves' who figure in these fictional revisions permit her to "cast herself as a character in [her] grand drama"³³ and are designed to share the burden of abjection. Pym's diaries reveal how she cultivated multiple selves:

And for about half an hour I was my old gothick self -- the self that I've had to put off while I've been here -- and it's been quite easy -- in fact I seem to have adapted myself quite happily to this life -- and haven't felt at all miserable yet. And it's *very* hard to brood about Gordon [Glover -- the object of her love at the time] or even the darling Coppice [where she had recently lived]. Is this like an anaesthetic and will the effects wear off sometime? I can only wait and see. (VPE: 202)

Another diary entry from about the same time (1943) observes that films and radio "take you out of yourself, your new self, into your old one -- but not too badly" (VPE: 202), while yet another cryptic note, possibly an idea for a novel, simply states: "On Being Yourself, and how you cannot be *too* much yourself or the life wouldn't be endurable" (VPE: 223). Pym's slippages from one 'self' into another -- in the acted-out guise of 'Sandra' or Päävikki Olafsson (her Finnish alter-ego³⁴), or through

³³ Janice Rossen, "Love in the Great Libraries: Oxford in the Work of Barbara Pym", *Journal of Modern Literature* 12(2) July 1985: 280.

the translation of autobiography into fiction, as in the case of Barbara Bird -- are actualised through the use of perspectives that shift between the internal and external. She retains an edge to her subtext in its treatment of subjectivity and gender, however (placed at risk, say, by her mindful use of the text as a concept in self-healing), by emphasising the junctures and disjunctures that exist between these selves, the contradictions -- to use her phrase -- in being "a real person as well as a flat one" (*VPE*: 80). Pym's subtext centres especially the consciousness of an internal self, charting its development, exploring (as Rita Felski expects of any self-analytical text) conflicts and ambivalences in relation to the problematic of self-identity.³⁵

Pym shared this tendency to re-work abject responses to love and desire in her fiction, particularly as these responses informed the construction of self-identity, with another woman writer, Rosamond Lehmann. Appropriately, Pym read Lehmann and admired her treatment of the "uncertainties of loving"; an entry from one of Pym's 1953 working notebooks offers a brief and characteristically ironic fictional situation based upon her reaction:

The young woman has just read a novel by Rosamond Lehmann about the suffering of women in love -- it makes her feel inferior as if she isn't capable of suffering so much. Perhaps when I'm older, she thinks hopefully. (*VPE*: 265)

In chronicling Lehmann's story, Nicola Beaman reveals that the writer's crises of love were no less personally apocalyptic than Pym's, especially for the way in which they affected Lehmann's 'writing self':

Rosamond Lehmann, like Nancy Mitford, is intensely in favour of women sacrificing everything to love. A new generation of readers was moved recently to hear her bringing a radio interview to an end by declaring that she would rather have

³⁴ Holt, *A Lot to Ask*, 82.

³⁵ Felski, 82.

had the joy of a lastingly happy marriage than have been a writer; echoing a contemporary novelist, Denise Robins, who asserts in her autobiography that 'the only thing a woman truly needs is to love and be loved, and that nothing can be emptier than the golden bowl of success'.³⁶

According to Wyatt-Brown's assessment, Pym might be seen to agree with Lehmann's (and, by extension, with Robins') opinion regarding the achievement of happiness, for Wyatt-Brown feels that Pym equated success with having a husband.³⁷ But it is more likely that Pym preferred the fullness of the artist's 'golden bowl of success', seeking the satisfaction that came with being a published writer. In 1936, in rationalising the state of her relationship to Henry Harvey, she wrote: "I must *work* at my novel, that is the only thing there is and the only way to find any happiness at present ... I want *Liebe* but I would rather be satisfied if my novel could be published".³⁸ So while Sandra longed for love, it is apparent that Barbara sought to translate her revisions of romance into literary successes, and, in the course of this, sort through sensitive issues relating to the problematic of self-identity. Holt corroborates this notion, noting that Wilmet, the heroine from *A Glass of Blessings*, "resembled her creator in her capacity to love, her capacity to be hurt and her capacity to come through it all, having learnt something about herself in the process".³⁹ In this regard, Pym and Lehmann had much in common: "sadly", Beauman writes,

since there is something of every novelist in her heroines, I would conclude that Rosamond Lehmann herself loved men who could not return her love with the same intensity and that her novels are in a sense an elegy to this fatality. Yet they convey the intense, if different, feeling that comes with loss, the rediscovery of self that comes with love.⁴⁰

³⁶ Beauman, 210.

³⁷ Wyatt-Brown, *Barbara Pym*, 2.

³⁸ Holt, *A Lot to Ask*, 61.

³⁹ Holt, *A Lot to Ask*, 181.

⁴⁰ Beauman, 211.

Like Lehmann, Pym loved men who, for various reasons, could not return her love with the same intensity (Henry Harvey, Gordon Glover, and Richard Roberts are three principals most cited in this regard). But it could also be said that in portraying the uncertainties of love as she experienced them, Pym's writing represents more a celebration of (instead of an elegy to) one's capacity to love rather than to *be* loved. In other words, her novels' compensatory function resides in the manner in which they subjectify the lives of those who love -- these are Pym's conventionally-unattractive, unprepossessing, self-deprecating, marginalised, *abject* heroines -- rather than those who are loved -- men who, for the most part, appear both unlovable and undesirable. But inasmuch as her artistic expression contributed towards a process of purging, built upon memory (which served as "a great transformer of pain into amusement", according to Pym [CS: 410]), compensating for feelings of abjection she experienced through love, her rejection as a published writer introduced new yet familiar feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. By the early 1960s, "[h]er books had replaced her love affairs as the chief preoccupation of her life", Holt writes, "and in this rejection [by her publishers, Jonathan Cape] she felt all the cumulative pain of her early unhappiness".⁴¹ At this time in Pym's life, the uncertainties of love were replaced by the uncertainties of the literary market, and Tom Maschler, senior editor of Cape at the time of her rejection, joined the growing list of rogue males who devalued her.

But even as Pym longed for both love *and* publishing success, she was always content to settle for food. Obviously, food could never provide the opportunity for

⁴¹ Holt, *A Lot to Ask*, 193.

drama or achievement that being in love or being a successful writer offered, but it furnished, by dint of the manner in which it factors rather unromantically in the daily matrix of life, a repository for her energies when love and literary success eluded her. Indeed, food *was* "something to love".⁴² The pleasure she derived from it remained a constant in Pym's life; its compensatory value was undiminished. And in the process of eating, Pym re-confirmed her 'self'. As she explained in a letter to Philip Larkin in 1977, in the wake of the news that Macmillan planned to publish *Quartet in Autumn* (when he gleefully opened a celebratory bottle of champagne in her honour):

Isn't it splendid the way good news, when you're older, sends one to the drink of some kind -- even if not M. et Ch. at least a glass of something extra! (When I was much younger unrequited love caused me to buy and eat halfpound slabs of Cadbury's coffee-milk chocolate. A good thing one's tastes change!) (*VPE*: 413)

Yet Pym's eating patterns never really changed. For her, even the most mundane of foods offered a safe, risk-free outlet for love: "I love Bob, I love Richard, I love Rice Krispies ..." says the brisk jolly voice from the pulpit, and a ripple of laughter goes through the congregation. Perhaps it is best in the end just to love Rice Krispies?"⁴³ So while Pym employed her writing to re-cast her unrequited lovers as comic figures of dubious attraction, food offered similar therapy, evident when Pym and her sister invent "a Maschler pudding -- a kind of milk jelly" (*VPE*: 414) -- in a bid to empower the self through the abjection of the other (in this case, Tom Maschler, the object of Pym's displeasure at Cape).⁴⁴ In these ways, Pym's identity becomes fixed by food

⁴² The title of her first novel is borrowed from Thomas Hanes Bayly's poem: "Some tame gazelle, or some gentle dove:/ Something to love, oh, something to love!"

⁴³ MS PYM 162.

⁴⁴ Hilary Pym re-created the dish for a television production, *Miss Pym's Day Out*, using lime jelly, remarking that it had a "poisonous look but it tasted quite good". *A La Pym*, 8-9.

as much as it is by her penchant for unrequited love or her compulsion to write. But in order to understand better how this can be and to appreciate the role food plays in the formation of an abject psyche like Pym's, we must examine in further detail how food figures within the conception of the phenomenon of the abject.

Food and Loathing at Lunchtime: Figuring Kristeva's Abject

In her reading of Kristeva's essay on abjection, Toril Moi describes the abject as neither subject nor object, but as a sort of 'pre-object' representing "the first effort of the future subject to separate itself from the pre-Oedipal mother".⁴⁵ In this way, one could say the abject figures within the creation of a first, primary sense of self, the first 'I', and although it may correspond to sensations like nausea, disgust, and horror -- "signs of a radical revulsion (or *expulsion*)"⁴⁶ -- the abject, or 'object of revulsion', Moi explains, is more a process than a 'thing'.⁴⁷ The creation of the future subject is effected through the situation of the new, fragile 'I' within a separate space from the archaic mother, which suggests the abject is closely linked to the construct of the feminine (Rosemarie Tong reiterates that "society's problem is with the abject, the

⁴⁵ Details concerning the phenomenon of the abject are not only found in Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, but also in two essays, "Freud and Love: Treatment and its Discontents", 238-71, and "Psychoanalysis and the Polis", 301-20, *The Kristeva Reader* ed Toril Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986). Quotation taken from Moi's commentary accompanying the essays, 238.

⁴⁶ Moi in "Freud and Love: Treatment and its Discontents", *The Kristeva Reader*, 238.

⁴⁷ The anthropologist Angyal offers a hypothesis about the nature of 'disgust' which is similar to Kristeva's theory of abjection. He says "that disgust derives from a primitive dread of being contaminated or debased, and is generated principally by the waste products of the human and animal body, which in a broad sense include anything coming from the body. Involved also is a fear of coming into contact with the object of disgust and, even more, of ingesting it". Simoons, 107-8.

'feminine' being but one specification of it"⁴⁸). This separate space, so crucial to a formative understanding of where the self ends and the other begins, is marked by a boundary or wall. The body of the newly created 'I' marks its own fragile, tenuous boundary at points of ingestion and expulsion, where, according to Kristeva, abjection occurs at a border between two distinct entities or territories, "[a] boundary between nature and culture, between human and the non-human"⁴⁹, where humans intrude on the territories of the animal.

Kristeva's definition of the abject transcends all received ones, which (as the *Oxford English Dictionary* states) describe the 'miserable' and 'wretched', or the 'degraded', 'self-abased', and 'humble', for Kristeva affirms that it is "not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite".⁵⁰ Moi expounds on this by stating that "the abject is not *per se* linked to dirt or putrefaction [but] can be represented by any kind of transgressive, ambiguous or intermediary state".⁵¹ So, in an effort to protect the integrity of the self, abjection serves as a mechanism that, through disgust or revulsion, guards boundaries, fends off sublimation, and protects the subject from becoming an object of consumption for the other. An attack on what Kristeva terms the self's 'clean and proper' body can occur at any one of a number of boundaries between territories, at fragile points which

⁴⁸ Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1989), 230.

⁴⁹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 75.

⁵⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.

⁵¹ Moi in "Freud and Love: Treatment and its Discontents", *The Kristeva Reader*, 238-9.

separate the body from the other, from the outside world. Points of ingestion and expulsion, which correspond to Freud's designation of the oral and anal, are manifest sites where the body is breached; others include the genitals, nose, ears, and pores.

"[C]ontrary to what enters the mouth and nourishes", Kristeva claims, "what goes out of the body, out of its pores and openings, points to the infinitude of the body proper and gives rise to abjection".⁵² The body's excretions contain impurities which, if left unattended, lead to defilement or disorder; in order to avoid pollution, excretions must be disposed of swiftly. Margaret Visser notes that because they stink, faeces and urine are easily abjected, leading to a direct and immediate reaction.⁵³ Other excreta are equally repulsive (snot, Visser notes, "is nasty, viscous stuff, to be sniffed back, wiped away, or deliberately blown out and disposed of, as fast as possible"), while all "[e]ffluvia and defluxions remind us of the symptoms of disease as well". When confronted with these signs of pollution, the unconscious reaction of the body is to shudder with horror, whereby its boundary, the skin, involuntarily responds to threat.⁵⁴ Kristeva describes, for example, the process of her own body's abject response to the membrane which forms on the surface of milk:

I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly, and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire. Along with sight-clouding dizziness, nausea makes me balk at that milk cream [...]⁵⁵

⁵² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 108.

⁵³ Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner*, 310-11. All references to Visser in this section are extracted from these pages.

⁵⁴ Visser further explains that "the word 'horror' itself refers to the ultimate physical response to fear, which is the skin reacting so violently that tiny muscles in it contract and the hair stands erect -- the basic meaning of *horror* in Latin is 'hair standing on end'", *The Rituals of Dinner*, 311.

⁵⁵ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 2-3.

Kristeva's complex response to the milk's membrane arises from the fact that this foreign object is liable to breach her body's boundary via the mouth. According to Bahktin, "next to the bowels and the genital organs", the mouth is the most significant bodily orifice "through which enters the world to be swallowed up".⁵⁶ Yet while it is true that the anus and genitals figure prominently within the psychology of the pre-Oedipal infant's response to its own body, such that the operations of these orifices are widely restricted through the imposition of taboos and rules of exclusion, with the result that these anatomical checkpoints really do fascinate *and* repulse, the mouth is a site of *primary* identification for the abject-subject and is arguably more sensitive than other bodily boundaries within the process of abjection. For unlike the anus and genitals, the mouth normally remains exposed so that it can help signal emotions and form words; like the anus and genitals, the mouth may be sexualised, and (particularly with women) made up, fetishised, objectified, even ravished -- and, in some cultures, must be covered in public. And as is the case with other bodily orifices, the mouth expectorates certain substances which must be voided, while even more significantly, it provides the most frequently travelled route for foreign things -- most typically food and drink -- to breach the body's boundaries and enter its inner sanctum.

Food "designates the other (the natural) that is opposed to the social condition of man and penetrates the self's clean and proper body".⁵⁷ In order to prevent the defilement of this body, food objects that *must* enter it through the mouth, being necessary to its survival, must also be subject to rituals of preparation and

⁵⁶ Bahktin, *Rabelais and His World*, 26.

⁵⁷ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 75.

consumption, to restrictions and taboos. As Kristeva states, "the fact remains [...] all food is liable to defile", while "[f]ood loathing", in particular, "is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection".⁵⁸ Nick Fiddes corroborates this notion in describing food's social and psychical significance, noting how -- "along with only a few other similarly significant acts such as sex and defecation -- eating breaches our normally sacrosanct bodily boundaries".⁵⁹ In the process of food abjection, the future subject rejects food offered it and in so doing, rejects the desire of the archaic mother, the primary other, who offers. Since the mother is the first 'object' of the future subject -- essentially she is its first food, "both desiring and signifiable"⁶⁰ -- an expulsion of the mother and her food represents the future subject's first attempt to throw up a wall and create its own separate space. In this way, food abjection always signifies, in some fashion, the paradox represented by the rejection of one self which leads to the creation of another self as separate and distinct:

'I' want none of that element, sign of their [the mother's and father's] desire; 'I' do not want to listen, 'I' do not assimilate it, 'I' expel it. But since the food is not an 'other' for 'me', who am only in their desire, I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish *myself*.⁶¹

But food only becomes abject, however, if it is a border between two distinct entities or territories. In this case, rotten food approaches the realm of the impure, while "remainders" (or 'leftovers'), Kristeva notes, "are residues of something but especially of someone", in that "[t]hey pollute on account of incompleteness".⁶²

⁵⁸ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 75, 2.

⁵⁹ Fiddes, *Meat*, 38.

⁶⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 32.

⁶¹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 2-3.

⁶² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 76. Margaret Visser further notes that the term, 'pollution', literally means "matter out of place". *The Rituals of Dinner*, 301.

Significantly, food derived from animals is more liable to defile than fruit or vegetable matter, chiefly because the former consists of either the bodies or body parts of animals, or the by-products of animals' bodies: potentially-bject reminders of the blurred borders between culture and nature, the human and inhuman.⁶³ While eating the remainders of animals may symbolise human domination of the natural world, the consumption of animal by-products may unconsciously remind us of our place in, and our quasi-infantile reliance upon, 'Nature', leading to the defence of human ascendancy through the institution of abjection.

Meat, with its implications of blood, death, and profanity, weighs even more heavily within the formulation of the abject than do animal by-products, which can be obtained without the need to kill their animal-providers. Kristeva notes that in its reference to blood, in particular, meat provides "a fascinating semantic crossroads, the propitious place for abjection where death and femininity, murder and procreation, cessation of life and vitality all come together".⁶⁴ So in order to circumvent this abject response to meat, consumers enact a process whereby meat comes to represent 'food' rather than 'waste product'.⁶⁵ For the most part this is achieved through sublimation: in the euphemisms we ascribe to meat, in the complex and subtle ways we prepare it for consumption, and, among Western cultures, in the cryptic ways in which we market it -- plastic-wrapped and placed on white foam trays. But because meat's

⁶³ Frederick Simoons explains, for example, that many African ethnic groups consider eggs the excrement of fowls and therefore apply taboos to eggs that decree their consumption analogous to the consumption of faeces, 73.

⁶⁴ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 96.

⁶⁵ Simoons, 108.

cultural role must be carefully scripted and controlled, and because it must invariably be treated with that 'man-made' element, fire, before it can be consumed, society will always regard meat with ambivalence, as a totemic reminder of the ephemerality of borders between human and animal, sacred and profane, culture and nature:

In contrast to the ripe fruit that may be eaten without danger, food that is treated with fire is polluting and must be surrounded with a series of taboos. It is as if fire, contrary to what hygienist conceptions posit, far from purifying, pointed to a contact, to organic food's meddling with the familial and the social.⁶⁶

Kristeva's observation here further indicates something even more significant for the purposes of our study: that an adherence to laws of binary opposition and an implementation of food taboos to protect borders and prevent pollution or admixture imply that the process of abjection both modifies, and is modified by, gender. Meat (the food item most restricted by taboo) and women (the sex most subjected to restriction) are unified in a discourse of abjection, each proscribed from polluting the other, or from polluting 'man' as he endeavours to achieve spiritual enlightenment.⁶⁷

Taboos form part of the anatomy of the life of the abject individual ("in the symptom of the abject, the abject permeates me, I become abject"⁶⁸), for taboo, according to Freud, signifies both the 'sacred and consecrated' as well as the 'uncanny, dangerous, forbidden and unclean'.⁶⁹ A life lived in abjection and by the rule of taboo,

⁶⁶ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 75.

⁶⁷ Eira Patnaik describes the archaic belief that 'woman' is "[b]ereft of soul, she is unadulterated carnality", 65, (from the Latin *carnis*, meaning flesh); while Nick Fiddes talks of the medieval notion that a love of meat signified a love of profanity, adding how "[t]he church has a long history of commending its avoidance when spiritual control is held to be the particular ambition of good Christians". *Meat*, 205. This notion is explored more fully within the context of Pym's fiction in Chapter 3.

⁶⁸ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 11, 15.

⁶⁹ Cited in Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 59.

then, is one not engendered by desire -- for Kristeva says desire is always for objects -- but through exclusion, as "exclusion of a substance (nutritive or linked to sexuality)" helps to protect purity and maintain order.⁷⁰ And yet the abject is further characterised as a "locus of needs, of attraction and repulsion, from which an object of forbidden desire arises"⁷¹, thus suggesting, paradoxically, that the 'abjectionable' is also the 'alluring'. Indeed, the abject can -- like Francis with his banana -- be both 'devastating' and 'fascinating' (to use Pym's terms), while Kristeva notes that "so many victims of the abject are its fascinated victims [for] it is out of such straying on excluded ground that [the abject-subject] draws his *jouissance*".⁷² Equally beguiling is the vicarious thrill of the 'in-between', the 'ambiguous', "being a composite of judgement and affect, of condemnation and yearning, of signs and drives" -- being, for example, a reticent 'Barbara' and dashing 'Sandra', "a subject in the process of constituting itself as such".⁷³ Ambiguity within the context of subjectivity can be both risky and exciting:

Having provided himself [sic] with an *alter ego*, the Other no longer has a grip on the three apices of the triangle where subjective homogeneity resides; and so, it jettisons the object into an abominable real, inaccessible except through *jouissance*.⁷⁴ The process of identification, of constituting an identity, involves the tempering of the libido and the deferral or displacement of the drive for unrestrained oral assimilation. And yet, Kristeva says, "[t]here is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded"⁷⁵, while Freud designates the prohibited as that which "mostly

⁷⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 17.

⁷¹ Moi in "Psychoanalysis and the Polis", *The Kristeva Reader*, 317.

⁷² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 9, 8.

⁷³ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 10, 47.

⁷⁴ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 9.

concerns matters that are capable of enjoyment".⁷⁶ In this way, transgression and sublimation may lead to the realisation of want, resulting in pleasure, or *jouissance*, and in view of the power of this psychical reward, "[o]ne thus understands why so many of the victims of the abject are its fascinated victims -- if not its submissive and willing ones".⁷⁷

Within the formulation of the abject, sublimation also plays a key, dual role. On one hand, abjection guards the fragile self against consumption, or sublimation, by the other, while on the other hand, this same self utilises sublimation to keep the abject under control. In this incarnation, sublimation can take the form of deferral, displacement, or transference -- any action employed by the subject to protect its 'self' from the often overwhelming force of abjection. However, Jane Gallop expands on Kristeva's understanding of this latter use of the term, sublimation. Gallop applies Michele Montrelay's definition, which rejects the "'misinterpretation' of 'sublimation' [that] consists in seeing in it a passage from the sexual to the non-sexual", and posits instead that it "involves giving up an infantile, unmediated relation to *jouissance* and operating in the register of metaphor and mediation, operating effectively in an adult order".⁷⁸ Following on from Gallop's elaboration, it could be determined, then, that sublimation provides a way for the abject-subject to enjoy the thrill of the prohibited without having to 'stray onto its excluded ground', something that can be achieved through the autonomy of language. As Rosemarie Tong explains, "Kristeva wanted

⁷⁵ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 5.

⁷⁶ Cited in Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 59.

⁷⁷ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 9.

⁷⁸ Gallop, 112.

society to come to terms with the abject", stressing how "[t]he marginalized discourses found in madness, the irrational, the maternal, and the sexual must release their revolutionary powers into language".⁷⁹ Sublimation, as a form of repression, is "quite primal" but allows for this revolutionary release. It does not discourage the drive for unrestrained oral assimilation as it permits the abject-subject to "hold on to the joys of chewing, swallowing, nourishing [it]self ... with words".⁸⁰

And this brings us back to Pym, who did, indeed, nourish herself with words, and whose writing could be located within the context of Patricia Yaeger's search for women who "speak of their pleasure and find pleasure in speech".⁸¹ But even as Pym found pleasure, say, in consuming food and disgorging words, her obsession with food points toward a deferral of desire, a displacement of sexual preoccupation, an abject recognition of the *want* on which her language is founded. Her love of food supersedes the emotions elicited by sexual, and even personal, interaction, revealing how the writerly unconscious connects the author's psychical condition to a sublimated expression of desire. And even if we divest Kristeva's conception of its more radical elements, the psychical as well as the physical implications of the abject remain entirely relevant to our discussion of Pym, who, as we will see in the ensuing critical inquiry into her private writing, appeared to endorse the creed of her long-time friend, Robert Liddell, whose personal slogan was "Make Tea, Not Love".⁸²

⁷⁹ Tong, 230.

⁸⁰ Kristeva, "Freud and Love: Treatment and Its Discontents", 244.

⁸¹ Patricia Yaeger, *Honey-Mad Women: Emancipatory Strategies in Women's Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 2-3.

⁸² This information was provided by Robert Smith in a talk presented at the Barbara Pym Literary Weekend, St. Hilda's College, Oxford, August 1993.

'The account of this day seems to be all about food!': Loving to Eat, Eating for Love

One is struck upon reading Pym's personal writing by her obsession with food and how the remembrance of any given day was framed by a recollection of it. Her diaries kept in the Bodleian Library date from January 1932, and in thirty-one entries for this month alone, Pym refers to food, eating, or mealtimes in no fewer than seventeen. A typical entry from 31 January reads: "Had a very lazy afternoon and didn't eat much during the day. By supper time I was hungry and did justice to the good fare provided".⁸³ This is quintessential Pym: it fully delimits her preoccupation, as though this day might be better recalled because of its reference to food. (The fact that Pym also reveals her appetite was impaired earlier in the day is unusual for her at this time in her life, for -- like love-sick Anthea from *Crampton Hodnet*, whose mother worries that she could have 'managed a bigger piece of cake' -- "she always [had] such a good appetite" [*CH*: 205].) Equally characteristic of this entry is her affected writing style, the way she writes of doing 'justice to the good fare provided'. This affectation, noted earlier when Pym talked of the 'devastating', 'dissipated' Francis, is even more evident in a later entry: "I went out at about dinner time to take the air and incidentally to do some shopping. I supped delicately off grapefruit and bananas mashed up in milk!"⁸⁴ Her use here of an exclamation mark signals her consciousness of affectation, conveying a tone of comic self-mockery and betraying her recognition of the true mundanity of her 'delicate' supper. Sometimes, however, Pym surprised even herself with the precision she used to record the pedestrian details of her appetite:

(6 May 1934) Felt very depressed in the morning. It was a rough, windy + rainy day. We had a good lunch though -- and there were no dons in at all! Fun

⁸³ MS PYM 101, folio 11 recto.

⁸⁴ MS PYM 101, folio 16 verso.

eating asparagus! Afterwards I went out with Horace. We visited the Ashmolean, whose paintings seemed very meagre after Cologne. Then to his digs where we ate chocolate + smoked. Paul came in at teatime looking terribly dissipated [sic] and unshaven but withal very attractive. He stayed to tea. Then Horace and I talked a good deal and eventually dined at the Town & Gown -- a very good dinner too (the account of this day seems to be all about food!).⁸⁵

It is true that the account of Pym's days as recorded in the early diaries (and as shown by the entry above) was often about food, or men, or both. Certainly the numerous references to food reveal how she occupied herself in the absence of greater excitement from what she calls a "one-sex way" of life⁸⁶, which is to say, when she was languishing for want of male attention -- often a problem outside of term time, when Pym returned to provincial home life in Oswestry -- food was an immediate and welcome diversion. She writes how, for example, on 1 August 1933, "[she] sat in an armchair like a docile donkey", bored during an evening in at home with her parents' friends, "and knitted [her] dark green jumper. [She] also ate a lot of sandwiches when the time came".⁸⁷ In this case, the presence of food was obviously the only relief in an evening that was otherwise suffered under some duress. And yet the mention of food in reference to men, like the entry above detailing her day with Horace, helped Pym to recall her experiences with the opposite sex, sometimes with pleasure, while food cues further lent an air of nostalgia to even those memories recollected as painful. She once recorded an idea for a novel, for instance, noting how "[h]er memories of him were associated with delicious meals -- (as mine of Julian Amery) -- is that how it

⁸⁵ MS PYM 102, folio 77 verso. Obviously, by 1934 Pym still had not learned how to spell her favourite word, 'dissipated'.

⁸⁶ MS PYM 101. She writes, "(1 January 1932) Beginning the year in an excellently one-sex way. Went to Blackgate [a café in Oswestry] -- no thrills there".

⁸⁷ MS PYM 101, folio 81 recto.

turns out as one grows older? interesting study -- or does it depend on the people?

Some wild tears others with chocolate mousse in Balliol" [sic].⁸⁸ On another occasion she recaptured a memory of this same Julian (whose 'affair' with Pym played out over the course of a heady twenty-four non-consecutive hours⁸⁹) with the aid of food:

To receive a love letter and to be eating honey in bed on a June morning (in a bed sitting room in London). This was in 1939 -- me in Upper Berkeley Street. The letter was from Julian Amery and the honey from Robert Liddell (*Miel d'Hymette*) from Athens.⁹⁰

For Pym, memories of food nourished her memories of men, obviously an important function considering her need to translate life experiences into fiction. But as it turns out, Pym's memories of Julian were 'associated with delicious meals' and thus recalled with pleasure, while in the context of more dramatic relationships, Pym's experience with food was often unsettled and her memories not always recollected in tranquillity.

Just as the appeal of the devastating Francis and others like him came to be surpassed by the diversionary delights of Rupert Gleadow, so did Gleadow's charms wane soon after the 'colossal tea' incident, when he was replaced in Sandra's romantic fantasies by the "aphrodisiac" Lorenzo, referred to later in the diaries by his real name, Henry Harvey.⁹¹ Harvey had such a profound effect on Pym even before she got to know him properly that her normally infallible appetite sometimes deserted her, and

⁸⁸ MS PYM 40, folio 20 verso.

⁸⁹ According to Holt, Pym carefully recorded the amount of time spent at each meeting, adding that their twenty-four hour relationship provided her with "twenty years of memories". *A Lot to Ask*, 75.

⁹⁰ MS PYM 45, folio 17 verso.

⁹¹ On 12 February 1933, Pym wrote in verse form: "Adjectives to describe Geoffrey/ Beautiful -- Lovely -- Wonderful/ Heavenly (in the strictest sense of the word) / Lorenzo. Odd. Curious -- Fascinating -- / Foolish --/ Aphrodisiac!" MS PYM 101, folio 57 verso.

her recorded response to this eventuality makes it apparent that she attributed her inability to eat to the idea that she was consumed by love for him: (30 April 1933) "I couldn't eat any supper -- but drank a glass of water amazing what love will do! -- especially as Sunday night supper at College is something of a function".⁹² Surprised that her feelings for Harvey could quell her desire to eat, so that she could even resist the siren call of Sunday night supper at College, it is almost as though Pym tried to feed on -- sometimes literally and other times metaphorically -- the aphrodisiac, the 'food of love', that Harvey represented for her. Later in that summer of 1933, when she was back in Oswestry, Pym's appetite was still depressed and clearly mirrored her psychological condition, while she even exhibited symptoms of a physical illness:

(31 July 1933) The mood of Sunday night unfortunately prolonged itself into today -- this morning at any rate. I kept off work as the thought of it nauseated me and did some sewing which also depressed me! After lunch I took some Yeastvite tablets and continued to take them after tea and supper. A slightly unromantic way of curing lovesickness I admit, but certainly I feel a lot better now (10 p.m.).⁹³

Not just unromantic, the Yeastvite tablets also suggest a rather ludic attempt to cope with this consuming passion, signalling Pym's willingness to play to an audience in Harvey's absence. Though they hardly knew each other, she had provided him with a new name and a romantic identity and cast him as a new 'lead' in her romantic drama.

Henry Harvey had gone down from Oxford at the end of that summer term, so when the new academic year began, Pym keenly felt his absence from Oxford. She lapsed into a stage of what she continually refers to as "frugal" eating, psychologically bolstered by sightings of Harvey's friends, including Robert Liddell, who remained at

⁹² MS PYM 101, separate leaf between folio 61 and 62; according to BP's pagination, 126-127.

⁹³ MS PYM 101, folio 79 verso-80 recto.

the university. On 15 September 1933, she details a lunch she was eating when she was overcome, melodramatically, with thoughts of Harvey: "while I was eating my ham, chicken roll and HP sauce, a band on the wireless was playing the waltz, "But for You" [...]. The passion came over me in a wave 'accompanied with an inward sense of melting and languor'". She recovered enough to mention, it seems matter-of-factly, that "[a]fter a baked-beans supper [she] embroidered [her] red satin blouse and did some knitting".⁹⁴ (Already one can see how Pym was beginning to cultivate a habit of juxtaposing the passionate with the prosaic: inward melting and languor with ham and chicken, baked beans with embroidered red satin blouses -- part of a costume that helped produce Sandra's chic effect.) But by the end of September, Pym was once again suffering such profound misery due to Harvey's absence that she gradually stopped bothering to detail her meals. On 30 September she writes, "In the evening we went to Kemp Hall. I ate fruit salad and ryevita -- very frugal"; then (2 October), "I ate a solitary and frugal supper at Kemp Hall where I saw Noble [a friend of Harvey's] -- but he was too busy eating to notice me!"; and finally (4 October), "We ate (very frugally) in Kemp Hall".⁹⁵ She martyred herself in abstemiousness, languishing for want of contact with Harvey while repeating a stock poetic phrase, "If winter comes, can spring be far behind?", hoping, as she saw various of his friends, that Harvey's reappearance in Oxford was imminent.

Harvey *did* return to Oxford by 7 October 1933 -- Rosemary Topping burst into Pym's room at St Hilda's to confirm the sighting⁹⁶ -- and Pym's appetite was

⁹⁴ MS PYM 101, folio 88 recto-verso.

⁹⁵ MS PYM 101, folio 92 recto; 102, folio 1 verso; 102, folio 2 verso.

immediately compromised in her agitation: "I was terribly excited and couldn't eat any tea, though it was nice hearty buns, which I usually enjoy".⁹⁷ Though Pym could not have known at this time that her diaries would be published later, she had a tendency to formulate them as though she were writing for an audience; here she reassures an indeterminate reader of the monumental importance to her of Harvey's return, and yet is compulsively drawn to detail the food she might have eaten had his arrival not pre-empted her meal, with undeniably bathetic results. The diaries also record, over the course of that academic year while Harvey worked on attaining a B.Litt. and Pym completed a final year of undergraduate study, the manner in which their developing relationship assumed its characteristic pattern. Pym pursued Harvey and he responded -- sometimes attentively and other times with indifference -- causing her to withdraw in frustration, determined to sever contact, only to renew her pursuit in the end. During this period of intense upheaval and emotion, Pym's eating habits also shifted. When she first formulated a romantic identity for Harvey in the guise of Gabriel/Lorenzo, her scripted love consumed her to the extent that her appetite was disrupted just in the manner in which she imagined a love-sick heroine to be affected by the unrequited, but when she later formed a relationship of sorts with Harvey, leading to an affair that brought Pym quantifiably more unhappiness than pleasure, she masked her emotions with a desire for food. At this time, food offered a degree of pleasure, offset the disappointing realities of love, and helped restore order to her life.

⁹⁶ Holt says Rosemary and another friend, Mary Sharp, were "two like-minded frivolous girls [...] who were aware of [Pym's] romantic passions for young men she had never met and the concomitant looking up and tracking down that it entailed". *A Lot to Ask*, 44.

⁹⁷ MS PYM 102, folio 3 verso-4 recto.

Hazel Holt confirms the psychological impact upon Pym of her relationship with Harvey, having stated in interview with Anne Wyatt-Brown that "Pym's long and fruitless pursuit of [him] permanently undermined her fragile self-confidence", a self-confidence further undermined by Liddell and others who persisted in discrediting the veracity of her feelings.⁹⁸ Clearly Pym was frustrated with Harvey's cavalier attitude, having received occasional tokens from him which may have sometimes led her to believe that his feelings matched her own. But her diaries further suggest that she was disenchanted with the sexual side of their relationship for, as Wyatt-Brown surmises, "Harvey, like most male undergraduates, was more intent on his pleasure than on hers [and as] a result, Pym began to feel that sex was what she gave in return for the pleasure of his company".⁹⁹ Her physical and emotional submission appeared to be at odds with her psychological withdrawal, such that Pym's ambivalence towards Harvey manifested itself in a curious way at the level of the body: through the consumption of food. In other words, even though Pym did not reveal symptoms of more extreme forms of female eating disorders, like anorexia or bulimia, she indulged in behaviour -- including binge eating and compensatory eating -- that was symptomatic of an abject, disordered psyche. Such behaviour tallies theoretically with Kim Chernin's view of the cause of female eating disorders: "women suffering from eating disorders are telling us, in the only way they know how, that something is going seriously wrong with their lives as they take on the rights and prerogatives of male society".¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Wyatt-Brown, *Barbara Pym*, 28, 32.

⁹⁹ Wyatt-Brown, *Barbara Pym*, 31. Holt's biography, not surprisingly, avoids commenting categorically upon the evidence of Pym's sexuality. Victoria Glendinning is not so reticent, however, and suggests that the diaries not only reveal that Pym was sexually active as an undergraduate at Oxford, but that she was, in fact, more sexually active than most. Cited in Jan Fergus, 36fn.

Her diaries reveal, for example, that after Harvey had been back in Oxford for only a little over a month, Pym's penchant for frugal eating lapsed into a tendency to overeat. She was not often conscious of her behaviour and its impetus, however, until well after she had indulged her appetite to the point of excess:

(26 November 1933) The usual day until tea time when I went to Horace at 40 Wellington Square. I kissed him although I didn't want to -- but he gave me a lovely red and white check scarf, and I ate a large tea. In fact I ate rather too much all day. A desire to see Gabriel is beginning to come upon me.¹⁰¹

Not surprisingly, the fact that Pym's life was further complicated by romantic ties to other men, including Horace, only seemed to intensify her feelings of abjection. In this case, submitting to Horace's unwanted kisses did not even offer the reward of the pleasure of the company of the man she loved, though she was willing to accept the scarf *and* the food he provided as a tax on her affections. No doubt Pym hoped that in seeing other men who obviously valued her in ways Harvey did not (we recall here the relationship she pursued in Germany, as well, discussed in the previous chapter) she could displace the unhappiness Harvey aroused in her, and yet her diaries suggest that as the year progressed her depression deepened, while she continued to try to eat her way out of misery. "I couldn't work in the evening and felt very depressed and lovesick for Gabriel", she writes on 19 January 1934, adding, "But the passion was to some extent unromantically satisfied by food".¹⁰² Later, after having endured a time of particular difficulty with Harvey, followed by an understanding which led to a brief period of mutual contentment, eventually the realisation of the futility of her pursuit of him caused Pym to seek solace in food once again:

¹⁰⁰ Chernin, 19.

¹⁰¹ MS PYM 102, folio 20 verso.

¹⁰² MS PYM 102, folio 34 verso.

(10 March 1934) But my happiness, although real at the time, was only momentary. Once in the train the intensity of all this wretched Gabriel business came back to me. Also I didn't feel too well, but arrived home I had a good meal which cheered me up.¹⁰³

So while the *idea* of being in love with Harvey had once left Pym almost happily bereft of an appetite, the reality of love -- characterised by his emotional detachment and importunate sexual demands -- left her with a void she filled with food. Indeed, the discourse of hunger that one can trace through the diaries from this period in Pym's life resembles what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar would describe as a series of images that form part of "the dramatic thematic pattern of enclosure and escape"¹⁰⁴; Pym sought release from the dissatisfying script she had written herself into, enclosing herself within a new one, marked by a drive for self-preservation in nourishment.¹⁰⁵

A more extreme manifestation of Pym's depressed state of mind can be found in her habit of 'buying and eating halfpound slabs of Cadbury's coffee-milk chocolate' in an effort to cope with the anxieties of unrequited love. Having alluded to this youthful tendency in a 1977 letter to Philip Larkin (as previously mentioned), Pym records an instance of this form of compensatory eating in a diary entry dated 12 April 1934: "In the afternoon I thought I'd go without tea + stayed in Bodley till about 5.30 but I began to feel very hungry and also morbid, so I came away + ate a large block of

¹⁰³ MS PYM 102, folio 51 recto.

¹⁰⁴ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "The Genesis of Hunger, According to Shirley", *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), 85.

¹⁰⁵ According to Freud, this drive for self-preservation by means of nourishment has a psychological, rather than a purely physiological, source, and is therefore sexual in nature. He states: "The baby's obstinate persistence in sucking gives evidence at an early stage of a need for satisfaction which, though it originates from and is instigated by the taking of nourishment, nevertheless strives to obtain pleasure independently of nourishment and for that reason may and should be termed *sexual*", 10-11.

chocolate".¹⁰⁶ This rather radical form of food consumption, to eat something that momentarily satisfies but is devoid of nutrition and, indeed, potentially harmful when consumed in sizeable quantities, emphasises the strength of Pym's feeling of abjection. Chocolate -- rich, dark, fattening, quasi-addictive -- bears a connotation of sinfulness and an undeclared cultural 'order of restriction' prescribing quantities suitable for consumption, especially for its female consumers. But eating unusually large amounts of chocolate gave Pym a route by which to stray onto excluded ground, providing her with an alternative form of *jouissance* not found within the confines of her affair with Harvey. And if, at the time, she felt disempowered by her almost involuntary obsession with him, for the way in which, when they were alone, "his attitude towards [her] was made so cruelly obvious" (*VPE*: 51), then her attempts to curb morbidity through binge eating and inappropriate food consumption may be read as the surest sign of a disturbed identity, a disordered system, a body at the point of effecting a radical revulsion. Indeed, Pym's body had become -- to paraphrase Carol J. Adams -- the text upon which she inscribed her dissent; her inarticulateness became encoded in her food choices.¹⁰⁷

In mid-1934 Pym made the first tentative efforts to provide herself with a new mode of expressing dissent, to formulate a text in which she *could* articulate her displeasure and receive pleasure in doing so. "Sometime in July", she records in her diary in September of that year,

¹⁰⁶ MS PYM 102, folio 67 verso.

¹⁰⁷ Adams, 163. Specifically Adams talks about food choices with respect to female vegetarianism as part of a plan of action meant to aid in the deconstruction of a patriarchal power base.

I began writing a story about Hilary and me as spinsters of fiftyish. Henry, Jock and all of us appeared in it. I sent it to them and they liked it very much. So I am going on with it and one day it may become a book. It is interesting in more ways than one. It is of course 'for Henry', and in it I seem able to say what I cannot in the ordinary course of events. Barbara keeps looking back to her youth, and so I have an excuse for revealing some of my present feelings about Henry. (VPE: 61-2)

Giving vent to her feelings through the forum of fiction writing, albeit in a way in which she had to mediate these feelings through comedy so that even the subjects of her scrutiny could approve of her efforts and not take umbrage, did not prevent Pym from resorting to compensatory eating again at later stages in her affair with Harvey, and nor did it entirely stave off further bouts of anxiety, marked by episodes of hysteria and depression. (On 7 October, for example, she wrote four pages of her story and then gave way to an "hysterical outburst" because her mother was annoyed with her over a trivial matter; Pym records that she enjoyed the catharsis as she "hadn't really cried for ages", and the outpouring made her realise that she had "to do [her] best to be honest with [her]self and ask [her]self whether [she was] really in love with Henry" [VPE: 63].) What is most significant about Pym's return to fiction writing -- for she had not been writing at the university prior to this point -- is the fact that in articulating her feelings about Harvey within the context of the story that would eventually become the novel, *Some Tame Gazelle*, she was able to effect the process of a radical revulsion, one founded upon the creation of a new, fragile 'I' as reflected within the separate space of this new text. In writing, Pym re-drew the boundaries which separated her body from the outside world, where words on a page came to represent, quite literally, the expectoration of effluvia, of feelings and emotions too long held within, contributing to her state of defilement and disorder. To paraphrase Kristeva further, through this abjection of herself, Pym established

herself, so that what once defied discourse had now become a source of *jouissance*.

Years later, she spoke of this early writing and the pleasure it wrought:

When I was eighteen I went up to Oxford to read English. Most aspiring novelists write at the University, but I didn't, though I *did* start to write something in my third year, a description of a man who meant a lot to me. I tore it up, but this person did appear later in a very different guise as one of my best comic male characters. There was nothing comic to me about him at the time, but memory is a great transformer of pain into amusement. (CS: 409-10)

And not only does memory transform pain into amusement but, as Kristeva tells us, laughter, a product of comedy, "is a way of placing or displacing" the abject.¹⁰⁸ The deceptively light and cosy story that would become *Some Tame Gazelle* marked the beginning, then, of Pym's long tradition of voicing the abject through the comic.

Working along with the therapy of fiction writing, time and distance helped Pym cope with the pain and disappointment her experiences with Harvey brought on, so that eventually she was able to picture him in conjunction with pleasant memories of food, as she had always done with Julian Amery. She writes on 22 July 1936:

Things like getting tea ready and emptying tea leaves out of the teapot remind me more poignantly of those happy days when I was Henry's secretary than anything else. It is poignant, but not exactly miserable. I stood for several seconds in the kitchen quite still and thought of him. I made tea for us so many times in the day + night.¹⁰⁹

Clearly it was more pleasant for Pym to remember this period of service to Harvey, when she made tea *and* indexes, when she was indispensable to him in the months leading up to the submission of his dissertation, than to recall "all the other times", for example, when he'd "sworn and promised" not to touch her (VPE: 55). Of course, as Wyatt-Brown points out, Pym had already cultivated a tendency, in the depths of her

¹⁰⁸ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 8.

¹⁰⁹ MS PYM 103, folio 60 verso-61 recto.

embroilment with Harvey, to detail the ritual of tea following intimate encounters (having recorded in her diaries his passionate behaviour rather than her own), "a cozy event which after all was not embarrassing to describe".¹¹⁰ Later, in avoiding Harvey's advances and proceeding directly to the communion of tea, Pym was able to defer the disappointing reality that often accompanied the realisation of desire. Thus her relationship with Harvey can be characterised, in its beginning and ending, by positive images of food, initiated by memories of mixed grill and beer drinking (10 May 1933: "he's fussy so I had to pick out all the least greasy of the fried potatoes for him"¹¹¹), and concluding with a poignant but admittedly pleasant memory of tea service. And thus Pym represents the man/woman dynamic that eventually becomes a feature of her novels, "a reciprocal relationship" (as she writes in *Less Than Angels*), not founded on sex and desire, but one in which "the woman [gives] the food and shelter and [does] some typing for him and the man [gives] the priceless gift of himself" (*LA*: 72).

The next life-changing affair Pym experienced was a brief but angst-ridden one that occurred during the war years while she was living and working for the Censor Bureau in Bristol. The man, Gordon Glover, was the estranged husband of one of Pym's housemates at that time, Honor Wyatt; Glover was not only unsuitable (because married) but Pym's diaries reveal his remarkable capacity for an indifference towards her which rivalled that exhibited by Henry Harvey. It is unfortunate that some of Pym's diaries from this period are lost to us -- 17 February 1976, "Destroyed

¹¹⁰ Wyatt-Brown, *Barbara Pym*, 31.

¹¹¹ MS PYM 101, folio 63 recto. She adds, "(What an awful man to marry! -- at least I always say so -- but really there's something terribly attractive about the idea)."

(in the fire, it being cold weather) some pages of a 1943 diary. The person who inspired the main reason for it is now dead" (*VPE*: 399) -- but her record of life after

Gordon's departure details Pym's devolution into anxiety, misery, and depression:

(Wednesday 10 March 1943) Oh, a bad day. Beware of complacency, and you must fight all the time and have the same struggles. Tears on top of the bus going to Avonmouth, up into Sea Mills, down into Shirehampton and Johnny Doughboy in the park. And at lunchtime when I was alone, I howled... (*VPE*: 162)

It seems, though, that Pym did not allow her despair to affect her appetite in the way that it had with Harvey, no doubt due to the fact that she took great pains to appear "drearily splendid" (*VPE*: 169), to hide her emotions from the others with whom she lived (which included Glover's young children and Pym's sister, Hilary). Indeed, she was so effective in subverting her emotions (when, in reality, she was overcome with a complex mix of jealousy and longing even when the children received tokens from their father¹¹²) that the others -- except for Wyatt, who became Pym's confidante -- were probably unaware of her profound unhappiness. More important, eight years of living at home with her parents honing her writing skills, coupled with the bitterness inspired by Glover's abandonment, left Pym with a sharper, more mature vision which translated itself into a heightened introspection in her diaries, manifestly affecting the fiction she would later produce. In expressing anger through her texts, Pym exacted a sort of revenge upon Glover (just as she had done with Harvey) by creating a comic male character in the form of Fabian Driver, with his magnificent marrow and penchant for fish suppers, using the trope of food to amplify his character flaws.

¹¹² "Julian, coming out of the gate, greeted me with the news that Daddy had sent him some liquorice allsorts. Rush of ridiculous emotion, of course!", *VPE*: 159.

The diaries from this period mark a temporary end to the richness and quality Pym achieved in her personal writing as a result of her entanglement with Glover, for, motivated by his departure, she joined the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS) and was eventually posted to Italy. Her diary writing was sporadic through the rest of the war though it was at this time that Pym began to use this forum to record ideas for novels and stories ("Ideas for Naples Poems or Stories' [...] bad food lacking salt and half cold"¹¹³) so that when she returned to civilian life and began her part-time career as a novelist, the value of her diaries as private repositories had been superseded by her working notebooks, personal yet full of the raw material she turned into fiction.

Typically, the sort of phenomena that stoked Pym's imagination involve socio-cultural quirks, the incongruity between appearance and reality, the extraordinary manifest in the ordinary. Various diary entries prove that her preoccupation with food continued unabated, the recorded images offering their defamiliarized view of the quotidian, but also often featuring undercurrents of a sublimated desire, taboo, and the feminine in a subtly abject mix: "Elderly women indulging in a guilty passion for ice cream".¹¹⁴ Indeed, Pym exhibited a curious fascination for the elderly, particularly elderly women, and observed them with a detached (and not always kind) regard, sometimes describing their behaviour in the most extreme terms of abjection:

Sitting at lunch in the help yourself in B & H I think, why, those women sitting around one are like lunatics in some colour supplement photograph of bad

¹¹³ MS PYM 110, folio 32 verso.

¹¹⁴ MS PYM 104, folio 161 recto. In a similar entry she writes, "Guilty passion for ice cream -- in Lyons the most unlikely looking men can indulge in it", where the ownership of guilt is far more ambiguous. It could be read, like the entry above, to imply that women feel guilty eating ice cream whereas men, being conventionally less body conscious, can indulge their appetites freely. MS PYM 40, folio 13 recto.

conditions in a mental home. Twitching or slumping or bending low over their food like an animal at a dish, (especially if eating *spaghetti*).¹¹⁵

Here Pym mixes three key ingredients within the configuration of the abject: food, the feminine, and the animal. As Kristeva points out, these three elements are also conjoined within a Biblical reference, wherein "a feminine and animal temptation [...] is concealed under the first dietary trespass".¹¹⁶ At least part of Pym's motivation at this time for observing and recording oddities of human behaviour arises from her burgeoning anthropological insight -- what she playfully described as "her anthropologist's 'enquiring mind'" (*VPE*: 322) -- where the results of study were not written up for scholarly posterity but were instead subjected to her novelist's ironic treatment and moulded into fiction. However, Pym may also have been driven to examine the margins of the human condition and, in particular the female constituents found there, because of the lure of what Kristeva calls "the locus of the abject", a paradoxical need to identify with, and a paranoid urge to exterminate, "the object that allows [one] to speak in the first place".¹¹⁷ No doubt Pym's own anxieties and fears concerning ageing, loneliness, and isolation generated her morbid, abject response to a venerable femininity, a response often predicated upon witnessing primal, body-broaching behaviour like eating.

The experience of war, or more precisely, the experience of food rationing in the war and post-war periods, also left its mark on Pym and permanently affected the way in which she wrote about food. Indeed, rationing seemed to intensify an already

¹¹⁵ MS PYM 70, folio 4 verso.

¹¹⁶ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 95-6.

¹¹⁷ Kristeva, "Psychoanalysis and the Polis", 302.

undue preoccupation with food, so that the absence of food took on the spectre of an unrequited lover: (30 January 1941) "Links [her mother] managed to get a big jar of marmalade -- such are the joys of going without. Not even love is so passionately longed for!"¹¹⁸ The numerous references to food from this time render the diaries a revealing record of war-time food consumption as they mark occasions when the unusual was consumed (24 April 1941: "Not a very remarkable day in any way except for [...] curried eggs for supper which are luxuries in times like these"¹¹⁹) or when unusual quantities were consumed (3 July 1941: "Had a marvellous supper of fried eggs and potatoes and felt really full!"¹²⁰). When she joined the WRNS, Pym also had an opportunity to see food in an abundance to which she was quite unused: (22 July 1943) "After that Beatrice and I scrubbed a larder -- saw masses of butter etc. large tins of golden syrup like petrol tins".¹²¹ On the whole, though, the effects of war-time rationing and even more stringent post-war rationing led Pym to re-evaluate the importance of food not only to physical well-being, but to spiritual, psychological, and even intellectual wellness, for she appeared to endorse the sentiments of the narrator from *A Room of One's Own*, that "a good dinner is of great importance to good talk. One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well"¹²² -- though Pym might have gone so far as to suggest a good dinner was perhaps *more* important than good talk. Even the chance to meet with Henry Harvey in 1946 to share in the

¹¹⁸ MS PYM 107, folio 25 recto.

¹¹⁹ MS PYM 107, folio 46 recto.

¹²⁰ MS PYM 107, folio 62 verso.

¹²¹ MS PYM 109, folio 46 verso.

¹²² Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 23. Interestingly, Pym noted in her diary of 1943 that she was reading *A Room of One's Own*, saying it was "so delicious that [she] could quote whole paragraphs". MS PYM 109, folio 83 verso.

momentous consumption of a chicken had Pym thinking more of the prospect of eating than of seeing the man who had dominated her life so fully a dozen years earlier, a notion corroborated by Hazel Holt, who remarks, "[i]t is noteworthy that, now, it is the question of food (a chicken was a rare and splendid treat) that seems to be uppermost in her mind rather than actually seeing Henry".¹²³

Indeed, as Pym entered her late-middle years she seemed conscious as never before that the satisfaction she derived from food exceeded the pleasures she gained from her relationships with men. On 3 November 1955 she wondered whether an "[e]vening out pub visiting with Bill O'Hanlon [was] to have been an evening of seduction(?)", cryptically explaining that "it didn't quite turn out as he wished. How hungry I was, eating ham sandwiches".¹²⁴ This episode recalls the 'colossal tea' experience from twenty years before, when Pym's prodigious appetite had frustrated Rupert Gleadow's plans for seduction. But against Gleadow's desire, Pym's fixation on food seemed contrived, a calculated plan to divert the course of his lust, while in the case of the unfortunate Bill O'Hanlon, her singular interest seems unabashedly genuine, and on this occasion it is *her* frustration which leads her to exclaim, "Why don't men think of eating more!"

Yet the apparent balance Pym had achieved at this stage in her life was altered dramatically by two events that occurred in the early 1960s, catapulting her back into the psychological turmoil she had experienced in her earlier lovelorn days. One we

¹²³ Holt, *A Lot to Ask*, 146.

¹²⁴ MS PYM 47, folio 7 recto-verso.

have already discussed: in March 1963 she was rejected by her publishers, Jonathan Cape, and for the next fourteen years she grieved for her former status as a published author, becoming mired in depression and self-doubt over her writing talents and the bleak future for her 'type' of book on the literary scene. The other event to have far-reaching effects on Pym's psyche pre-dates the rejection by seven months: in 1962 she met Richard Roberts, a Bahamian antique dealer eighteen years her junior, and he became what Pym's biographers and her sister colloquially refer to as 'the last love of her life'. The fact that Roberts, whom Pym lovingly called 'Skipper', was as equally (though differently) unsuitable as any of his predecessors has less to do, though, with a disparity in their ages than with his homosexuality, something Pym was aware of and yet, in the midst of her fantasy, did not always credit with due significance.¹²⁵ She may have thought early on in their relationship -- already embroidering their story into the fabric of the fiction she was working on at the time -- that "[s]he (Leonora) thinks perhaps this is the kind of love I've always wanted because absolutely *nothing* can be done about it!"¹²⁶, but Pym was clearly upset when the relationship inevitably 'failed' and linked it to the melancholy she felt in her continued rejection as a writer. In 1967 she wrote to her friend Bob Smith, who introduced Roberts to her, about "the depression that occasionally threatens when I think of nobody wanting to publish my novels, and my total 'failure' (if that's the right word) with Richard" (*VPE*: 338).

¹²⁵ Pym often let herself believe that age and level of maturity combined to form a major stumbling block to the success of her relationship with Roberts. She notes in her diary of 19 July 1965, for example, "Rainer Maria Rilke 1873-1936. Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis 1855-1934. (18 years difference between them, but *he* was a man of genius)", *VPE*: 329.

¹²⁶ MS PYM 60.

In the intervening years, however, before it became apparent that Roberts had 'dropped' her, their relationship mirrored Pym's previous entanglements, characterised by pursuit on her part and withdrawal on his. Like Harvey and Glover, Roberts was an attractive man who initially may have been flattered by Pym's attention, while early signs of his solicitude towards her no doubt fed her fantasies (2 June 1964: "My birthday and dinner with Richard at his flat. Champagne and a lovely present. A Victorian china cup and saucer. 'The Playfellow' -- a lady and her cat" [*VPE*: 317]).¹²⁷ Additionally, while courting Roberts it appears that Pym regressed to a former 'self', one rather like the Sandra of her university days (Holt notes that one playful letter to Roberts "might have been written by a younger Barbara") so that Hilary was obliged to advise her 'to be her age'.¹²⁸ But in these early days with Roberts, Pym 'fed off' her romantic fantasies just as she had done with Harvey years before:

When she goes up to London for the day Deb chooses a restaurant exclusively for women (like me in DHE Maundy Thursday 1964) where she can give herself up to extravagant contemplation of her love.¹²⁹

She also performed domestic services for Roberts in ways that recall her behaviour in previous relationships:

Today [24 May 1964] as I sit in Lyons -- a man comes to the table and a middle-aged woman is fetching food for him, as I have fetched for my darling R. on more than one occasion.¹³⁰

Missing from the first entry, however, is Pym's characteristic detailing of the food a lovelorn and contemplative woman might eat given the time and appropriate space to indulge her fantasies -- a telling indication of Pym's anxiety over the relationship's

¹²⁷ Holt, *A Lot to Ask*, 208 re. Roberts' initial willingness to be courted; 211 re. Hilary's admonition.

¹²⁸ Holt, *A Lot to Ask*, 209.

¹²⁹ MS PYM 58, folio 11 verso.

¹³⁰ MS PYM 60, folio 5 recto.

reciprocity. She also recounts with pride the lengths to which she goes in order to provide for her 'darling', but betrays a hint of frustration that 'R.' does not offer *her* more, suggesting that she wanted to 'consume' more than he was willing to provide.

As already mentioned, she was writing a new piece of fiction when Roberts entered her life, building on notes for what were then known as the Rose manuscripts and which eventually became the novel, *The Sweet Dove Died*. Although Pym had a few 'set pieces', including a clerical scandal and an incident involving furniture borrowed from a repository (this remained in the novel's final version), the notes seemed to lack a focus, and this, coupled with the fact that she was suffering severe depression as a result of Cape's rejection, meant that her writing efforts were doubly compromised.¹³¹ Roberts not only provided a welcome diversion from the misery of her new status as a rejected author, but with his exotic and worldly background he offered rich fictional possibilities for the creatively-menopausal Pym. One of the first notebook entries to feature the pair appeared on 5 June 1963, in a passage where she seems to be experimenting with the notion of using their liaison as the leavening for new ideas in writing. Typically, though, the scene treats the subject of food and the sublimation of desire:

Oh those meals with her -- indigestible Italian food in Soho restaurants of which one wouldn't dare to see the kitchen. At least now they would not have to go to bed -- no love only friendship or whatever this light irritability is called. (*VPE*: 304)

Here the indigestibility of the food underscores the impersonality of the relationship, while the mention of sex after the meal (or, in this case, the absence of sex) recalls

¹³¹ Anne Wyatt-Brown provides a clear chronology and reasoned assessment of events from this period in *Barbara Pym*, 114-116.

numerous other bouts of anxiety in the face of post-prandial intimacy. But as this passage offers 'his' perspective -- for it is he who expresses relief over an avoided requisite sexual encounter -- 'her' views on this topic are characteristically muted.

Evidence suggests that Pym's feelings for Roberts were more visceral than any she had expressed in previous relationships, her desire for him more readily apparent though still barely articulated. In most ways, their affair followed what was by now a very familiar pattern: she nurtured the relationship while he seemed ambivalent; she coped with anxiety, depression, and anger through disordered eating habits and ultimately through writing; she felt marginalised, the odd one out, within a complex triangulated network of friendships.¹³² And yet the very idea that she knew 'absolutely *nothing* [could] be done about' the sexual side of their relationship may have led her to try and push the boundaries of desire as she had not felt inclined to before.

Once, in her youth, she was thrilled just to be able to gaze upon male faces. Her diaries detail the facial perfection of Francis, Geoffrey, Rupert, Henry, and numerous others; one of her favourite Oxford Moderators she called 'Fat Babyface'.¹³³ She also described men's clothing with careful attention, preferring certain items to others and tending to idolise her favourites. A large grey overcoat of Harvey's held a

¹³² In her major relationships, triangles were formed by Pym/Harvey/Liddell, where Liddell became Pym's confidant but was ultimately unhelpful because sceptical of the depth of her feelings; Pym/Glover/Wyatt, where Honor Wyatt also acted as Pym's confidante whilst divorcing Glover on the grounds of adultery; and Pym/Roberts/Smith, where Pym worried that Roberts and Smith (another gay friend who introduced Roberts to her) were talking about her behind her back. For more, see Wyatt-Brown, *Barbara Pym*, 116.

¹³³ Holt, *A Lot to Ask*, 23.

particular significance for her, and she took every opportunity to wear it and once "sat on it sentimentally the whole evening" when he had forgotten it (*VPE*: 66). But she never divulged her thoughts on the bodies that inhabited these clothes even after she had become intimate with them. Because of this, her descriptions of Roberts' physicality is unusual (though she did favour a navy peacoat of his) and their scenes together are edged with desire:

(May Day 1964) At Covent Garden with Skipper. He crunches ice as we drink orangeade in the Crush Bar -- the great oil paintings, the flowers (real). A happy evening. If 'they' went to Covent Garden Leonora would like to feel the touch of his sleeve against her bare arm (but that would be as far as it would go). Close, intimate red and gold semi-darkness. (*VPE*: 316-7)

Even as Pym performs a near-simultaneous translation of life into fiction, where she becomes Leonora and Roberts transmogrifies into James, she permits herself to play with the notion of a desire subverted not by age difference or sexual orientation but by her heroine's solipsism. Pym then hides her own desire behind Leonora's icy, impenetrable exterior, slipping into a register of impersonality and summoning her heroine's presence whenever sexual tension rears its lustful head:

(31 January 1965) Who but R. would be welcome in the middle of a Sunday afternoon (c. 3 p.m.). Are you still brown she asks idly. He pulled out his shirt and revealed a square of golden brown skin on his belly. She (Leonora) found herself thinking 'All thy quaint Honour turn to dust/ And into Ashes all my lust'. Except that he probably hasn't any quaint honour. (*VPE*: 325)¹³⁴

Plainly, this last comment leaves untreated the issue of Pym's lust. Roberts may not have had any quaint honour, prompting him to tempt her with a glimpse of his 'golden brown' belly, but Pym unintentionally betrays a hint of her jealously-guarded desire, while their teasing game, predicated upon visual consumption and physical abstinence, forms part of the larger pattern of their idiosyncratic sexual dynamic. This play is

¹³⁴ The lines are paraphrased from Andrew Marvell's "To his Coy Mistress".

further evidenced by Pym's possession of what must be one of the most curious and provocative of the 'relics' among her papers lodged in the Bodleian Library: a holiday snapshot of Roberts swimming naked, his handsome face beaming up at the photographer (and at the possessor of the photograph) while the view of his buttocks is barely distorted by the meniscus of the clear tropical water's surface. We can only speculate on the circumstances surrounding Roberts' bestowal of this gift upon Pym (for it must have been a gift) as she makes no mention of it in her diaries, but in a way it speaks of Roberts' cruelty, the lasting impression of his smiling visage tantalisingly perched above his unclothed body offering Pym a visual feast whose consumption is perpetually deferred.

Any pleasure Pym derived from her rejuvenated capacity for love was short-lived. She notes, for example, in her diary of 20 February 1965:

A sad day. Rang R. in the evening and he felt 'guilty' which I hate. He came to tea on Sunday in his very spoilt little Bahamian mood, full of euphoria, money and sex talk, teasing me and being unkind to Minerva [her cat]. I get irritated with him. (VPE: 327)

The dire warnings of concerned parties also proved timely, for Pym's nurturing of the relationship in spite of the concerns of her friends was reckless, and, as Wyatt-Brown states succinctly, reveals how "growing older had not made Pym wiser".¹³⁵ As a consequence of the displeasure Pym inevitably felt from this lop-sided affair, at a time when she was already pre-disposed to unhappiness due to the cessation of her writing career, her ability to vent anger and alleviate disappointment through the activity of writing was badly damaged. She temporarily regressed to a state of inarticulateness

¹³⁵ Wyatt-Brown, *Barbara Pym*, 115.

similar to that which she experienced in the pre-writing days of her affair with Harvey, taking great pains to contain rather than release her pent-up feelings: (24 May 1965) "Fortunately all the fury and bitterness I sometimes feel has stayed hidden inside me and R. doesn't -- perhaps never will -- know!" (*VPE*: 328). But internalised bitterness took its toll: "I let fly about Richard [to Bob Smith] which rather spoiled things then and later in the evening, so that the thought of him has made my 'nervous indigestion' pain return" (*VPE*: 339). And after years of cultivating a practical approach to food which harked back to the youthful view she held in pre-Harvey days, Pym's frustration with Roberts also led to the occasional bout of abjection marked by episodes of compensatory eating and the mediation of desire through food:

Thursday 26 [October 1965] After the dentist the Buttery. A delicious creamy cake tasting of walnuts. Now Skipperless one begins to understand 'compensatory eating'. Better surely now to write the kind of novel that tells of one day in the life of such a woman.¹³⁶

Pym never wrote this novel but eventually was able to justify her failure with Roberts in writing another, altering the Rose manuscripts in order to focus on the story of Leonora and James. After completing a first draft, she sought critical input from Philip Larkin, explaining how only one friend (Roberts himself) had read it and found it "almost a sinister, unpleasant book" (*VPE*: 341). Larkin responded by saying that "it could be a strong, sad book, with fewer characters & slower movement"¹³⁷ -- an effect Pym was able to achieve through revision (Liddell calls it "deeper and darker than the 'canon'"¹³⁸), and in the process, reached a psychological plane to which she had pretensions even as a young woman: 'calm of mind, all passion spent'.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ MS PYM 62, folio 5 recto.

¹³⁷ Larkin, *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940-1985*, 406.

¹³⁸ Liddell, *A Mind At Ease*, 110.

¹³⁹ These lines are borrowed from Milton's *Samson Agonistes*. On 12 December

Armed with the determination "to be more cautious in future -- not allowing [her]self to get fond of anybody" (*VPE*: 340), Pym's life, post-Skipper, settled into an uneventful pattern of work at the International African Institute, writing ("a kind of personal pleasure and satisfaction, even if nothing comes of it in worldly terms" [*VPE*: 402]), domestic routine, and church activities, all of these well documented in her diaries and biographies. Searching for new material and a fresh outlook in her bid to re-situate herself within the publishing world, Pym continued to note items of interest, dwelling now on the often degrading process of ageing and the loss of social worth for the elderly -- especially for the older woman. She effectively captured instances of this through the trope of the conventionally socialising scene of eating:

(20 August 1970) If you were ever romantic, and, of course, you can't possibly be now, at your age, imagine lunching with somebody and him urging you to drink most of the wine because it makes him feel so sleepy. (*VPE*: 362)

In conjunction with a new manuscript she was working on in the early '70s for what she called her book about 'old people' (*Quartet in Autumn*), Pym also explored the idea that food provided a singular pleasure in the absence of romantic love, claiming that turning to food to find *jouissance* was a necessity for the elderly rather than one option among many: "Love, even the opportunity for it, had passed now -- no chance of that anymore, she thought almost indignant. What now then -- food and drink?"¹⁴⁰ The opportunity to vacillate between romantic love (manifest in the sexual) and literal love (manifest in the nutritive, among other things), according to Pym's indignant character, is a privilege of youth. But the 'indignity' itself, however, may be ascribed

1934, in the fullness of her fraught relationship with Harvey, Pym writes: "A lovely morning and I was with Henry. The intense misery of the night before had given way to a state of 'calm of mind, all passion spent', *VPE*: 64.

¹⁴⁰ MS PYM 71, folio 13 recto-verso.

to the writer's bent toward affectation, for not many years before recording this entry Pym had suggested that loving Rice Krispies was preferable to loving Bob or Richard.

On the whole it would appear that Pym was relieved to have reached a point in life where she could indulge her passion for food without fear of guilt. So it is perhaps, then, the greatest of ironies that food offered her little pleasure towards the end of her life due to the nature of the illness that would eventually kill her:

(5 August 1979) Perhaps what one fears about dying isn't the actual moment -- one hopes -- but what you have to go through beforehand -- in my case the uncomfortably swollen body and feeling sick and no interest in food and drink.¹⁴¹

This must have been very distressing for Pym, for not only did she suffer physically in her illness but her loss of appetite bore a symbolic significance as well. Her lack of interest in food -- long employed as a repository for desire -- was like the absence of love, a reminder to one who had always yearned for 'Love' that there really was no chance of *that* anymore. Furthermore, for Pym (as for Wilf Bason from *A Glass of Blessings*, who exclaims, "what poetry there *is* in cooking!" [GB: 138]), food was intimately connected to art. A loss of appetite was akin to a loss of artistic expression and, by extension, a loss of identity. But Pym's pain and fear was, however, greatly ameliorated by the unsurpassed pleasure of nearly three years of unprecedented success as a 'reborn' published author, and she died -- Hilary has noted that the death occurred with Pym's "customary consideration for others, just *after* breakfast"¹⁴² -- knowing that her last novel, *A Few Green Leaves*, was to be published posthumously.

¹⁴¹ MS PYM 81, folio 19 verso.

¹⁴² Holt, *A Lot to Ask*, 279.

In his Introduction to *The Barbara Pym Cookery Book*, John Francis claims:

It is natural to want to know everything possible about your favourite author. Laundry lists, old tram tickets, nothing which has belonged to, or passed through the hands of the beloved can possibly be thought of as trivial. We count ourselves fortunate to know the sort of food that sustained Barbara Pym, the types of wine she relished. To eat the very dish as she made it enables us to get that much closer [...]¹⁴³

Wanting to 'know' an author through her novels and seizing upon 'evidence' found there in the hopes that it may deepen that knowledge is perhaps a natural tendency, but it is one fraught with danger. Any reading of Pym's fiction must account for the way in which she undertook a *revision* of the personal, of the intimately apocalyptic, a revision accomplished through the acts of eating and ultimately in writing. Pym's own appetite was metonymically linked to desire, a desire she mediated through food and articulated through art. The desires of others -- especially of men, also betrayed by their appetites -- aroused symptoms of abjection and revulsion in her. Building on her own preoccupation with food and on her distaste for the preoccupations of others, Pym used her writing to reconcile self-perception with the expectations of society, to temper a youthful appetite for men with a more mature vision of male desires and a fuller understanding of male behaviour. Part of her success as a writer lay in an ability to translate this exploration of personal desire and anxiety, fear and loathing, modified by an 'attitude of detachment' gained from her anthropologist's mode of 'field-work', addressed in the following chapters, into narratives of universal appeal, leading her readers to want 'to get that much closer'. Part, too, however, lay in her compulsion to explore the 'self' under the influence of the abject, to stray into the realm of taboo by figuring the seemingly trivial, the nutritive, in relation to the unabashedly sexual, as witnessed in the response elicited in Prudence when she encounters Geoffrey eating:

¹⁴³ Hilary Pym and Honor Wyatt, *A La Pym*, intro. John Francis, 16.

He was eating -- perhaps 'tucking into' would describe it better -- the steamed pudding which Prudence had avoided as being too fattening. She had never seen him eating before and she now averted her eyes quickly, for there was something indecent about it, as if a mantle had fallen and revealed more of him than she ought to see. (*JP*: 46)

Chapter 3: 'Nothing to drink and not all that much to eat':

Pym's Women Serve Themselves

When Catherine Oliphant, in *Less Than Angels*, meets Deirdre Swan for a meal after the former has been rejected by a man who would eventually reject the latter as well, she embarks on a monologue meant to engender sisterly camaraderie:

Just the kind of place for two women to meet for lunch. [...] Nothing to drink and not all that much to eat -- no red meat, no birds, but poached eggs and welsh rarebits, the kind of nourishment that builds the backbone of this great country of ours. And we must help ourselves, too. (*LA*: 161)

Pym wrote this novel when the deprivations of recently suspended food rationing still impinged on the collective psyche of contemporary British society and while some eating establishments continued to experience difficulty in obtaining decent cuts of meat, which may explain why Catherine's restaurant fails to offer much. Even the eggs Catherine anticipates are only just becoming easier to obtain. Typical of many of Pym's heroines, the meatless meals on the menu are the ones which spark Catherine's imagination. She seems moved by this unromantic fare, content to consume it surrounded by a comic collection of unlikely people brought together for the purpose of eating. Catherine and Deirdre take their places, trays in hand, among other meat-abstaining women, while others serve meat dishes to uneasy men who feel awkward dining in a restaurant so obviously designed to cater to female appetites. It is here in the self-service restaurant, a site metonymically linked in Pym's fiction to sorority and female empowerment, that the impact of gender codes upon food consumption is most readily apparent.¹

¹ She models the restaurant in *Less Than Angels* on The Kardomah, Fleet Street. It was one of the self-service restaurants Pym frequented while editor at the

Patronised mainly by women and with its meals unabashedly centred on what social anthropologists label 'secondary', or 'feminised' protein (eggs and cheese), it is in a self-service restaurant that Catherine and Deirdre turn to each other in an effort to effect some sort of communion that will sustain them in the wake of mutual disappointment. Catherine must contend with her partner's, Tom Mallow's, infidelity and desertion, while Deirdre, Tom's new mistress, tries to cope with his detachment, admitting that "Tom isn't very easy, is he?" (*LA*: 163). As they commiserate with each other, trading stories about the same unworthy man, they fortify themselves appropriately with what is sometimes known as 'comfort' food, the sort of fare that formed the basis of most meals in times of extreme austerity. Indeed, in comprising the bulk of wartime home-front food consumption, meatless or reduced-meat meals provided nourishment for millions of people, mainly women, children, and the elderly of both sexes, while soldiers battled on the war front fortified with a daily ration of meat, the 'primary' protein. With wartime rationing at its apex, civilians were limited to a weekly script of one ounce of butter, four ounces of margarine, one ounce of cheese, and between one shilling and one and sixpence worth of meat (with a few added rashers of bacon), while the per capita consumption of meat in the Army and Navy was roughly two-and-a-half times that of the average civilian.² But rationing had been discontinued by 1953 and soon after many men's clubs in Britain once again

IAI, where she could serve herself while observing other patrons and passersby, taking notes. A literary notebook entry from 1 March 1961 reads: "Soup, jelly, bread and butter -- *that's* not much of a meal for a man -- I think as I sit in the Kardomah". MS PYM 54, folio 5 recto.

² The civilian ration sample (circa 1941) provided by Theodora Fitzgibbon, cited in Colin Spencer, *The Heretic's Feast: A History of Vegetarianism* (London: Fourth Estate, 1993), 315. The statistic citing Army meat rations is taken from Adams, 32.

offered first-class protein on their menus (witness, for example, the meal presented to Arthur Grampian at his club, in *Jane and Prudence*). Self-service restaurants of the sort favoured by Catherine, however, continued to serve food that would have been equally suitable in a 'blitz lunch'.³ And yet she feels her choice of restaurant is inspired, "just the kind of place" where women gather to eat because its simple fare, free from alcohol or meat, makes it unattractive to prospective male patrons, offering a safe haven for women to dine unself-consciously in the midst of other women.

It is not surprising that a restaurant whose menu continues to reflect the tastes of a society operating under some restraint also happens to be one in which rejected women like Catherine and Deirdre seek refuge in the company of other women, or that they feel they deserve this sobering food and can draw comfort from it. Most of Pym's heroines consume food that would not be considered suitable for men or mixed company (we recall that Edith Liversidge in *Some Tame Gazelle* eagerly anticipates a revised menu at the Bede sisters' home when the curate arrives unexpectedly, knowing the women would "all benefit from [the] presence" of a man [*STG*: 90]). Pym's women willingly consume meat substitutes and meatless dishes as these provided the nourishment that built the backbone of Britain, as Catherine avers, also implying that women themselves constitute that backbone. And while they queue in

³ A 'blitz lunch' recorded in a 5 November 1942 edition of the *Daily Telegraph*, entitled "Mrs Roosevelt has a Blitz Lunch", reports a visit by the American First Lady to a wayside hall in East Anglia: "Mrs Roosevelt served herself at a long counter and sat at a small table squashed between two other 'blitzed' women. Obviously she had thoroughly enjoyed herself". The menu featured vitamin-fortified vegetable soup, meat stew with potatoes, carrots and brussels sprouts, two kinds of puddings and coffee.

order to obtain their food, as they are dining in a self-service restaurant, Catherine's observation about women serving themselves -- ironically off-set by a scene where a petulant Father Gemini volubly declares that he "does not like this place" and has his meal served *to* him by a domineering woman (*LA*: 164)⁴ -- can be read as a creed of consumption for Pym's heroines. Though these women appear to embrace the three tenets of femininity as defined by Susie Orbach, for they defer to others, anticipate and meet others' needs, and seek self-definition through connection with another⁵, when they make these connections through the socialising medium of food (served by themselves, for themselves) they momentarily transcend the confines of gender roles. When temporarily relieved of the duties of servitude and divested of the responsibility of cooking for men and catering to their needs, Pym's heroines make food choices that may seem insignificant but are nonetheless empowering in an embryonic way.

Catherine and Deirdre's experience in the female-dominated environment of the self-service restaurant offers one view of Pym's treatment of the sexual politics of food. Pym refrained from creating characters whose behaviour might represent a radical departure from received social norms, and yet a heroine's meat abstention, like an odd form of conscientious objection, figures in her novels as the subtle subversion of a patriarchally-scripted food system which favours the male appetite and decrees that women cater to that appetite. (And if it appears that gendered behaviour within

⁴ Father Gemini reluctantly accepts a meat dish (lowly mince) ordered by his companion, Miss Lydgate, who treats him like a child and tells him "roughly" to "go and sit down" while she brings his meal to their table (*LA*: 164).

⁵ Susie Orbach, *Hunger Strike: The Anorectic's Struggle as a Metaphor for Our Age* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986), 43.

the scene of eating in Pym's novels tends to fall within class boundaries, this, too, is part of Pym's narrative, even didactic, strategy, where women are often portrayed as the under-class in an effort to highlight male privilege and advantage.) But in her writing Pym also describes women whose food 'choices' are closely defined by socio-cultural pressures, women who do not feel they can serve themselves so easily. By comparison, one can see that Catherine's food 'activism' barely scrapes the lid of subversion, hardly counter-balancing the symbolic weight of restraint and abjection brought to bear in other instances of Pymian women's mealtime decision-making.

In a brief entry in one of Pym's literary notebooks, for example, which may represent a record of the writer's own experience (characteristically, she obscures her emotional complicity by translating the episode into a third-person narrative), she describes a woman on a train who yearns for a food item that will offer relief, but instead opts for self-denial: "I [^]can't mustn't have a Pepsi she thought. A woman of my age ^{^and appearance} would be expected to order coffee. Yet she longed for the dark icy liquid and the prickle of its bubbles".⁶ Pym dithers over a suitable auxiliary for the verb in the first sentence; she may have realised that *can't* merely portrayed physical inability while *mustn't* better conveyed a sense of cultural inappropriateness. Furthermore, the woman's consciousness of what *is* appropriate she bases on the exigencies of gender, age, and social status (implied here through social markers: her appearance, the way she speaks and deports herself), leading the woman to tailor her behaviour according to the expectations of others. Bound by what Robert Liddell

⁶ MS PYM 71, folio 11 recto.

would call her "middle-class gentility"⁷ and painfully aware of cultural rules of propriety governing foodways, this woman responds to the implied threat of public disapproval. Even though she longs for the soft drink, which would seem more suitable given the situation (we assume she is both hot and thirsty), she rejects the object of her desire, unable to suspend her concerns about how others perceive her.

It has already been mentioned that social anthropologists have determined that in cultures where food taboos exist, more apply to women than men, the suggestion being that women show a greater potential to be morally and physically compromised by the consumption of mythically-mediated foods due to an alleged weaker moral centre and inclination (in a postlapsarian world) to be led astray.⁸ Margaret Visser also speaks of our cultural tendency to associate very dark food (like Pepsi) with "excitement and luxury", thereby underscoring its seductive capabilities.⁹ Here, too, the Pepsi represents a curiously ambiguous object of desire: its colour, coldness, and fluidity appear to embody a symbolic femininity while its bubbles "prickle", suggesting the action of a masculine form and force. It is not surprising, then, that the woman on the train feels compelled to dissociate herself from the sexualising, debasing, and sinful image of the forbidden Pepsi despite (or because of) the obvious pleasures that accompany it, settling instead for a less satisfying though more suitable cup of coffee.

⁷ Liddell, *A Mind at Ease*, 83. Liddell applies the term to Pym herself, but it appropriately transfers to Pym's female characters.

⁸ Adams, 27.

⁹ Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner*, 30. Visser lists dark food items like coffee, chocolate, truffles, caviar, *cèpes*, and even plum cake. The woman on the train rejects Pepsi in favour of coffee -- one dark drink for another -- and yet coffee also has its associations with good society and sobriety, and has higher class connotations than tea consumed outside a strictly-enforced afternoon teatime.

Despite her brief appearance in what is in effect a marginal notebook entry, the woman on the train may be seen as representative of the sort of woman who forms the backbone of Pym's fiction, both in her hyper-conscious awareness of social expectations and willingness to subordinate her own desires to the desires of others. Life for Pym's women is often portrayed in this way: circumscribed through having to reject (often things they truly desire) while they, in turn, are rejected by others. And as shown by the example of Catherine and Deirdre, two further variations on Pym's women, the ones who reject are usually men. Still, Pym's heroines manifest a certain determination, arising from their superior powers of judgement, revealed through the detailing of their psychical lives and in their facility for observation and self-analysis. In noting the interplay of human relationships with and through food, they register the discrepancies between gender roles and expectations: what society allows of feminine desire compared to the way in which it is articulated in their lives, and how clichéd notions of masculine desire differ from their experiences with the behaviour of men.

In Pym's novels, generally speaking, any philosophising on gender roles, the nature of the relationship between the sexes, or about 'Love'; any recognition of failed contact or missed connections; and all personal 'quests', however insignificant, are rendered through the perspective of her women rather than her men. Similarly, and just as importantly, considering food's position of prominence in the Pymian *milieu*, it is her heroines who engage in a more complex and introspective dialogue with food. Its significance varies according to the socio-political permutations in which it features. Or, more precisely, it may be said that the Pymian scene of eating involving

her heroines comprises a paradigm which is evinced in three different ways: as a symbol of female friendship and metaphor for proto-feminist action when women eat together; as a metonym of feminine desire when women eat alone; and as part of the grammar of discourse between the sexes when women prepare and serve food to men. An examination of this paradigm as it supports Pym's narrative structure, explored through an analysis of women as consumers in this chapter and women as providers in Chapter 4, offers an opportunity to reflect on her heroines' facility with abjection and sublimation, on the equivocal nature of relationships between the sexes in the novels, and on Pym's comic, ironic treatment of the myths underpinning a gender hierarchy.

To return for a moment to our representative heroine, Catherine, and the scene of women eating together: she may indeed seek self-definition in her connection with another, but her forays into the community of women in the self-service restaurant helps both to purify and radicalise her. She is able to come to terms with Tom's betrayal and forge new and promising relationships. In this way, Catherine's story disproves Robert Emmet Long's theory that Pym's "women depend wholly upon men for their self-identity".¹⁰ In fact, the surest sign that a Pymian heroine strives to define herself independently from a sphere of masculine influence may be read in her connection to other women and in her rejection of the patriarchal meal -- a rejection, in particular, of man's meat. Some of Pym's women, the 'gatekeepers of consumption' and guardians of patriarchal values, might agree that 'a man needs meat', but her heroines clearly do not. Pym herself was not vegetarian and none of her heroines are

¹⁰ Long, 215.

either -- though it is significant that when they meet in London for a meal, Jane and Prudence dine at a vegetarian restaurant -- and yet a phenomenology of vegetarianism runs through her novels, especially marked when women meet to eat. Though it may seem that by embracing a (near) meatless diet Pym's heroines conform to the nutritive demands society expects of their gender, their rejection or reduction of meat (effected through the consumption of it in lesser forms: minced or chopped, adulterated with vegetables in stews, or hidden in pies) speaks of their indifference towards a food item supremely valued by the patriarchy. While Jane Cleveland sees meat-eating as a form of idolatry, observing that "people [...] tend to worship meat for its own sake" (*JP*: 22), Pym's heroines who eschew meat engage in an alternative form of veneration. Their abstinence springs from Pym's own recognition, subtly articulated through a sensitivity for gender issues, of women's place and value in contemporary society.

Eating alone in a Pym novel, however, is a ritual with a different significance. "Solitary eating", as Jane Nardin has noted, is a "pleasure that has perhaps never received much attention from any other novelist"¹¹, while in a Pymian setting it is a common occurrence. The detailing of the solitary woman's meal -- like Mildred Lathbury's "lunch of two scrambled eggs, preceded by the remains of some soup and followed by cheese, biscuits and an apple" (*EW*: 200) -- accords with rules of literary realism, and yet it carries a hefty symbolic burden. Pym's 'Excellent Women' strongly adhere to an ethos of exclusion, following Kristeva, subscribing to traditional notions of femininity manifest through abjection, meekness, diminution, a will to serve others,

¹¹ Nardin, 21.

and modesty in physical desires, extending even to hunger.¹² In yet other examples, as with Prudence Bates, appetites are somewhat less restrained and thus more akin to the desires of men. In either pattern, however, whether the heroine is of the self-effacing, 'Excellent' variety or of the self-serving, narcissistic type, both are characteristically frustrated in the expression of their desires. As a result, these are often sublimated or directed onto 'safe' objects like food items. Thus, female appetite can be seen as a metonym of feminine desire in the novels. And while some heroines deny themselves (or are denied) nutritively and others deny themselves (or are denied) sexually, in many cases in Pym's fictional world the abjection of desire becomes a near-sacred rite.

Pym's own obsession with food, her propensity for observing and recording mundane detail, and her sensitivity toward the politics of gender form the basis upon which she concocts what she called her "literary soup": "I don't need cream and eggs and raw shell fish, but just this old cod's head, the discarded outer leaves of a cabbage, water and seasoning".¹³ Admittedly, though, Pym sought further literary inspiration within the world of her own experience, building on a familiarity with anthropological concepts and technique, having "learned how it was possible and even essential to cultivate an attitude of detachment towards life and people, and how the novelist could even do 'field-work' as the anthropologist did" (CS: 411). In her twenty-five years as editor of the anthropological journal *Africa*, she probably revised studies like "Dietary Change in a Sudan Village following Locust Visitation" (1949), "Yoruba Food" and "Yoruba Cooking" (1951), "Cannibalism: A Zande Text" (1956), and "The

¹² Orbach, 43.

¹³ MS PYM 56, folio 3 recto-verso.

Staff of Life: Food and Female Fertility in West African Society" (1976).¹⁴ These studies consider food within specific cultural contexts, often exploring traditions in foodways as these are affected by a society's gender conventions, informing Pym's perceptions of her own culture's 'tribal customs' and the way in which gender and food consumption operate as determinants in the formation of cultural biases. Using this insight, Pym wrote novels that are not so much concerned with 'the study of man embracing woman' as they are with the study of woman serving food to man. Within this sexual dynamic, illustrating the way in which gender codes mark food consumption, Pym's men and women *do* eat differently -- the women thriving on "nothing to drink and not all that much to eat".

Eating Across the Boundary: Food and Female Friendship

We have already introduced the idea of Pym's 'feminism': how she held conflicting views about love, marriage, and gender roles; how she examined gender issues in her novels within the context of romance, where romantic expectations are frustrated; and how she declined a feminist label and yet sometimes seemed to write like one anyway. This tendency is especially evident in the novels whenever women meet to eat together, or alternatively, when women eat singly surrounded by other women, in a parallel activity where they refrain from interacting and yet are empowered by each other's presence. Consequently, a public place to eat -- typically a restaurant, and often a self-service one in Pym's fictional universe -- rather than a woman's home,

¹⁴ Pym joined the editorial staff of *Africa* in 1946, featured for the first time on its masthead (as assistant editor) in 1958, and retired in 1973 (although she continued to do some indexing for a brief period). Her obituary appeared in 1980.

serves as the ideal place for women to meet, since the act of eating together in public bears a deeper political resonance. "Anyone who eats alone", Elias Canetti declares, "renounces the prestige which the process would bring him in the eyes of others. He bares his teeth simply for the sake of eating, and this impresses no one, for there is no one there to be impressed".¹⁵ Ignoring for a moment Canetti's unfortunate use of a masculine universal modifier, we can extend the logic of his position to suggest that a lone eater abjures the socio-political message encoded in food. Communal eating in the female-dominated environment of the self-service restaurant, however, displays its message encoded within the pattern of social relationships being expressed there. "The message", according to Mary Douglas, "is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries".¹⁶ One sort of transaction, female friendship, especially as it is exercised through the sharing of food, provides Pym's women with a medium through which to air and revise their concerns about gendered existence, about romantic love and the enigma of the 'Other'.

Despite her own very close relationship with her sister Hilary, the evidence of Pym's diaries suggests that her own realisation of the value of female friendship was late in coming, though arriving in time to affect how she wrote fiction.¹⁷ While at Oxford, Pym's self-identity was formed chiefly by a pursuit of men (Holt corroborates

¹⁵ Canetti, 261.

¹⁶ Douglas, *Deciphering a Meal*, 249.

¹⁷ Pym wrote in a letter in 1938, "it is marvellous being with Hilary [...], we have the most wonderful jokes about everything" (*VPE*: 123). While their closeness did provide the inspiration for the companionate relationship of the sisters Belinda and Harriet Bede in *Some Tame Gazelle*, from the time Pym went to university until after the war (when Hilary divorced her husband), they often led quite separate lives.

that after her years at a girls' boarding school, men *were* Pym's main interest¹⁸), and her female friends happily aided her in this endeavour: (24 January 1934) "Sharp and I took the opportunity to sleuth around the Bodleian. I had all the luck" (*VPE*: 47). Pym's connection with her female friends was for the most part one-sided, denoted by her habit of 'raving and soliloquizing' about the current object of her love (*VPE*: 40). So while these friends were fervent co-conspirators and Pym relied upon them for both counsel and sympathy, at this time in her life she still tended to relate primarily to men, and in her affair with Harvey she was especially reliant upon the partisan support of *his* male friends for insight and guidance. She records, for example, how "Jock [Liddell] told me a few things about Lorenzo which made me realize even more than I had hitherto done, what a terribly difficult person he is" (*VPE*: 51), and how "I had lunch with John Barnicot and we talked a good deal about Henry as we always do" (*VPE*: 72). However, Pym's compulsion to share her experiences as a prelude to enlisting support conflicted with a deep-seated need for privacy, and no doubt many of the more sordid details of her affairs were not shared -- and are sometimes only alluded to in the diaries. Even Holt, a friend for thirty years, states rather plaintively that Pym's "shyness and reticence concealed much of the variety and complexity of her personality, even from those who had known her for many years" (*VPE*: xiii).

But Pym gained a more mature understanding of the pleasures and possibilities inherent in 'an emotionally equal relationship with another woman', according to Wyatt-Brown, in the aftermath of the Gordon Glover affair in the early 1940s, when

¹⁸ Holt, *A Lot to Ask*, 21.

she was sharing a house with his estranged wife, Honor Wyatt. In her burgeoning friendship with Wyatt, their late night talks sustained by the consumption of groats (VPE: 169), Pym "learned the pleasure of mutual exchange, what the linguist Deborah Tannen has called 'troubles talk'".¹⁹ As a result, not only did her affair with Glover provide her with the experience and emotional impetus she fed off to turn misery into the material of fiction, exorcising her demons in the process, but her relationship with Wyatt supplied a positive model for female friendships in the novels as well. Glover furnishes the basis for the character of the egocentric and self-pitying Fabian in *Jane and Prudence*, while Pym and Wyatt's 'troubles talk' is portrayed in this same novel through the relationships Fabian's dead wife, Constance, maintained with his 'loves':

She had even invited his loves to the house for week-ends, and two women sitting together in deck chairs under the walnut tree, having long talks about him, or so he had always imagined, had been a familiar sight when he happened to look out of an upper window. In reality they may have been talking of other things -- life in general, cooking or knitting [...]. (JP: 63-4)

As Katherine Ackley rightly points out, relationships between women in Pym's novels can be ambiguously expressed, especially when men figure within the *ménage*.²⁰ But when the dialogue between the sexes often fails to bring about mutual understanding or effect intimacy, women's friendships offer connections in a disconnected world.

In Pym's novels restaurants are almost like alternate places of worship and it is here that connections, even tenuous ones, are made. According to social historian John Burnett, "the development of 'popular' catering by Lyons, A.B.C. and others" in

¹⁹ Wyatt-Brown, *Barbara Pym*, 62. Hilary, too, shared the house in Bristol with Pym and Honor Wyatt, and yet despite the attachment between the sisters, Pym cultivated Wyatt as her confidante, obviously valuing Wyatt's experience with Glover.

²⁰ Katherine Ackley, *The Novels of Barbara Pym* (New York and London: Garland, 1989), 73.

the 1930s meant that "a well-cooked meal could be had in comfortable surroundings, often to the accompaniment of a 'palm court' orchestra [...] for little more than a shilling".²¹ Such establishments were greatly favoured by Pym herself and feature in the novels as the domain of Pymian women. Mary Beamish, in *A Glass of Blessings*, notices how the place where she has tea with Wilmet Forsyth -- "a favourite haunt of shopping women" -- "'is really for women, isn't it?'" She points out "a rather uncomfortable-looking husband with his wife's parcels piled on his knee", noting how "'That poor man looks so miserable'". Wilmet also sees a young clergyman enter with an older woman she presumes is his mother: "[t]he two men looked at each other as specimens in a zoo might, each commiserating with the other in his unhappy situation". But Wilmet is not so sympathetic as Mary, concluding that the men "let themselves be led by their women" (GB: 80-1). Here, men take on the spectre of the 'Other': ill at ease, alien, almost another species, while the women operate freely. In the self-service restaurant, the notion of female agency seems to be predicated upon efficiency and control. This view of woman-as-subjective-centre and man-as-'Other' offers an essence of cultural subversion, though neither Mary nor Wilmet is a radical who presents substantive new ways of looking at gender realities. But the narrative voice that inserts itself (in many cases allied with the heroine's perspective) does offer a critically ironic view of gender behaviour. It is this subtle intrusiveness which was so important to Pym, who once remarked, "I must have a BPym woman character to give my angle occasionally".²² This angle consists of wry insight into myths of male

²¹ John Burnett, *Plenty and Want: A social history of diet in England from 1815 to the present day* (London: Scholar Press, 1979), 295-6.

²² MS PYM 159/1, folio 20 verso.

superiority and a tradition of female resignation, into cultural ordinances shoring up gender inequity, and hazards faced by opposing 'misinterpretive' sexual communities.

Catherine's viewpoint is often commensurate with that of an ironic narrative perspective and her entry into the female-dominated environment of the self-service restaurant is significant because of it. This is especially true when read against her experience in the cosy little Cypriot restaurant located near the flat she shares with Tom, where they often dine together and where she encounters Tom and Deirdre in a romantic *tête-à-tête*. Some time later when Catherine decides to rehabilitate her friendship with Deirdre, they arrange to meet in the impersonal surroundings of the self-service restaurant. This might be seen as a calculated gesture on Catherine's part, an effort to discompose the younger woman, for Catherine is an accomplished cook and could have invited Deirdre to her home to effect a quiet restoration accented with a suitable home-made meal. But Catherine's intentions seem genuine: they meet in an ideal neutral setting with self-service that relieves them of awkwardness when it comes to making food choices and settling the bill. More important, this sort of place is truly a refuge for Catherine. Upset upon learning of her partner's affair by finding Tom and Deirdre dining intimately together in the very restaurant where he and Catherine had eaten only days earlier, she realises she has no friends to turn to in a time of personal crisis, nobody to "bustle about making scrambled eggs and coffee on the gas-ring and then sit ready to receive confidences".

The best she could do was to turn her steps towards a vast eating-place where people were helping themselves to a curious variety of foods, for it was really too late for tea and too early for supper. And yet how many souls -- she thought of them in this hymn-like phrase -- seemed to be eating here at this unusual time. (LA: 103)

Catherine joins other 'worshippers' in the restaurant and unashamedly eavesdrops on the trivial conversation of two women. Eventually the women try to draw Catherine into their conversation, causing her to retire, but not before she experiences an epiphany concerning her situation, one that is both galvanising and liberating, and arises from their prosaic ramblings: "If Tom went, she would be free too" (*LA*: 106).

So when Catherine and Deirdre meet at the self-service restaurant, the former seems at ease among its masses, willing the latter to be relaxed as well: "Need you clutch that parcel to your breast, whatever it is? I should leave it behind to mark your place" (*LA*: 161). The improvement in Catherine's psychological condition hinges on her escape from the confinement of her relationship with Tom, and she is able to offer support to Deirdre, now suffering from the effects of Tom's wilful self-absorption. Two occurrences in this scene repeat a pattern set earlier in the novel, further solidifying the communion between the two women. In the first, Deirdre confesses that a recent dinner she has had with Tom was marred by his talk about Elaine, a former girlfriend and his first love. Catherine commiserates: "Poor Deirdre, was it one of those rather miserable meals, where you both look down into your glasses and trace patterns with forks and move the salts and peppers about?" (*LA*: 163), drawing an image that contrasts markedly with the scene where Catherine encounters the couple in the Cypriot restaurant, "Deirdre's hand lying comfortably on top of" Tom's (*LA*: 102). Both women now harbour discomfiting recollections of intimate meals with Tom in a cosy restaurant -- one witnessed by Catherine and the other experienced by Deirdre. Later, when Deirdre is momentarily overcome with

despair and begins to cry, Catherine diverts her attention with the comical duo of the formidable Miss Lydgate and the sulky Father Gemini. Catherine and Deirdre are "virtually compelled to give up their own conversation and listen to" this odd couple, recalling the scene where Catherine absorbs the dialogue of the two women in the restaurant she seeks refuge in on the day she learns of Tom's betrayal. And though the meeting between Catherine and Deirdre ends on an uncertain note, Deirdre wondering whether Catherine forgives her for her part in the affair and thinking that the older woman's remarks about Tom's thesis are a bit spiteful, they re-establish a connection nevertheless. This is proven later when Catherine spends two weeks in the Swan family home, being "cosseted and cared for" (*LA*: 241) after she receives (and later delivers to Deirdre) news of Tom's violent death in Africa.

A meeting over a meal between Emma Howick and Claudia Pettifer, in *A Few Green Leaves*, returns certain echoes of the experience of Catherine and Deirdre. In this case it is Emma, the heroine of the novel, who has had a 'dalliance' with Claudia's estranged husband, Graham. Interestingly, with respect to Pym's creation of a fully-realised fictional world in which her characters live and die in and outside of different novels, Emma and Claudia meet at a memorial service for the deceased Esther Clovis, a character from *Less Than Angels*; also present at the service is Deirdre, wife now of Digby Fox (with whom she had fallen in love after Tom's departure). But the resonance between the two scenes of eating ends there: while Catherine and Deirdre's meal is characterised by dialogue and a search for self-realisation through connection with the other, Emma and Claudia's meal is distinguished by the latter's monologue

and self-obsession. Canetti claims that "[a] certain esteem for each other is clearly evident in all who eat together. This is already expressed by the fact of their *sharing*", but this social code Claudia shamelessly flouts.²³ References to the various stages of the meal indicate how it progresses in spite of its want of a meaningful connection, while the final irony comes when Claudia requests they "go shares" and split the bill evenly ("After all, we did have the same", she says mistakenly [FGL: 139]). Readers discover along with Emma how Claudia's self-interest -- for she seems to "turn everything into some personal reference" and appears "more interested in what pudding she [is] going to eat than in Emma's possible relationship with her husband" (FGL: 138) -- rivals Graham's. It is gratifying to know, then, at the novel's conclusion that he returns to Claudia, for one cannot help but feel that these two ego-driven personalities deserve each other. More important, however, is the fact that this scene of eating offers the heroine, whose discernment of character and skills of observation are given full rein, a clearer view of Graham through Claudia so that Emma is able to effect a positive new way of thinking. Partly inspired by the casual treatment she receives from Graham (and by proxy, from Claudia) Emma's story can conclude on a hopeful note: "*She* could write a novel and even, as she was beginning to think, embark on a love affair which need not necessarily be an unhappy one" (FGL: 220).

Pym often uses the scene of eating as means of establishing character and sets scenes wherein her heroines, in particular, dine with others and thus offer readers the advantage of their sharp-eyed, non-verbal insights. This technique is evident in the

²³ Canetti, 258.

scene just described, where Emma realises that she "[has] done Claudia a good turn in helping her to avoid somebody she didn't want to see, but she herself [has] gained very little from the encounter" (*FGL*: 139). Readers of Pym, however, *always* gain immensely from these encounters. Indeed, there are numerous instances in the novels where women dine together and where social transactions shed light on a character's social proficiency, their moral worth, and even their narrative function. When, for instance, Edith Liversidge extends a "rough" invitation to Belinda Bede to "come and take pot luck" with her, Edith provides an immediate clue about the fate that awaits her guest: "Just coffee and baked beans -- you know our kind of supper" (*STG*:

183).²⁴ But the reality, however, is almost more than Belinda can bear:

Belinda stood uncertainly on the threshold of the little kitchen, watching Edith cutting bread and scooping the beans out of their tin into a saucepan.

"Hand me that ash tray, will you?" said Edith, but not before Belinda had seen a grey wedge of ash drop into the beans. "Drat it", she said. "Too late. Hope you don't mind?"

"Of course not", said Belinda nobly [...]. (*STG*: 184)

This wonderfully comic by-play effectively captures Edith's character and establishes her gender profile with neat economy: her disregard for both clothes and food is the ultimate expression of a mannish persona. Belinda's graciousness, on the other hand, is obviously a testament to her gentility of nature, and her final thought -- "Perhaps there was something after all in being a gentlewoman" (*STG*: 184) -- is delivered almost superfluously, for her actions reveal an ethos of *noblesse oblige*.

²⁴ It is interesting to note that Pym uses the phrase 'pot luck' according to its original etymology. Visser explains: "[t]he phrase 'pot luck' was originally used when inviting someone to a very informal family dinner, on the spur of the moment. The visitor was to expect nothing specially prepared, but only what the family would have eaten in any case that day. The guest's 'luck' lay in what day he or she happened to arrive, and what meal had been prepared for the family", *The Rituals of Dinner*, 84-5.

Edith represents a stock female character found throughout Pym's novels: a 'decayed' gentlewoman, blunt-spoken, rough, bullying, 'splendid', and careless in matters of appearance and diet. The indomitable Esther Clovis is another, with her dog-like hair and inability to make tea properly. Esther's 'friend', Gertrude Lydgate, who dominates Father Gemini, coercing him into eating a dish he does not want, is yet another, a strong character who leads Catherine to wonder

as she so often did why it was that the so-called 'well bred' had such very penetrating voices. It could not be thought, in these days, that they were accustomed to giving orders to servants. Miss Lydgate could be heard all over the room and Father Gemini matched his tone to hers. (*LA*: 164)

Such characterisations appear to be more a satirical representation of type rather than a critique of class, and yet they are inevitably a comment on gender. Gender-bending, in Pym's fiction, which usually involves upper-class immasculated women or middle- and working-class effeminised men, is a device by which the writer endows certain minor characters with the will to express themselves and act in ways her inhibited heroines cannot. In this way they function as overt cultural commentators, providing a foil for the covert assessments of Pym's restrained heroines. These mannish women in particular, including Edith, Esther, and Gertrude, often constitute an ironic portrayal of a defence of the patriarchy -- their own bold, man-dominating behaviour at odds with rather conventional beliefs about how others should conduct themselves.

Lady Selvedge provides one such example of the immasculated 'well bred' Pym woman: loud, directive, and (for the ultimate in satiric effect) with a reputation of being mean. Her appearance alone betrays her character for she is "a tall, pale-

faced woman, with a camel-like cast to her features -- perhaps a Habsburg lip if one took a more kindly view" (UA: 57). When she and Mrs Grandison, whose name offers an indication of her tastes, look for a place where they might have luncheon, the latter anticipates a delicious, even extravagant meal in a Soho restaurant or Simpsons in the Strand, a place famed for its meat. Instead, however, Lady Selvedge, whose own name recalls the terms 'salvage' and 'selfish'²⁵, leads her companion "into one of those ubiquitous tea-shops which cater for the multitudes of office workers and others who want a cheap meal at any time of the day" (UA: 56). Here, Lady Selvedge's eating habits offer a clear indication of her social ineptitude and lack of grace:

Lady Selvedge ate quickly, commenting on the excellence and cheapness of the food as she did so. "Luncheon for only three and ninepence", she declared, reaching out towards a miniature steamed pudding and drawing it towards her, "excellent!" (UA: 58)

It follows that the pudding she grabs is not hers, belonging instead to a young man whose table they share. When he attempts to rescue his dessert, Lady Selvedge reacts possessively, "'Oh no, this is mine' [...], making a shielding movement with her hands round the pudding in its little dish" (UA: 58). According to Margaret Visser, "it [is] especially low -- the mark of a peasant, over attached to his dinner and solicitous for it -- to embrace one's dish with one arm".²⁶ Lady Selvedge's solicitousness for someone else's dinner indicates her peasantry tendencies and ill-bred mind, and yet she feels compelled to lecture the young man about his own eating habits, drawn perhaps by a sense of civic and moral duty:

'Those sort of people eat far too much *starch*', said Lady Selvedge to Mrs Grandison in an audible whisper. 'Meat pies, chips, rolls and butter, and now this stodgy pudding. A dish of *greens* would be much better for you', she said, raising her voice and turning towards the young man. (UA: 58)

²⁵ In fact, the "selvedge" is the rough edge of a piece of cloth.

²⁶ Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner*, 330.

The irony, of course, lies in the fact that Lady Selvedge very nearly eats the pudding herself, betraying a belief that this food item can do no harm to her own well-being. This scene, though deliciously comic, is a forceful indictment of her character, revealing a sense of entitlement that she does not grant to others. For her part, Mrs Grandison remains an observer, situating herself only in order to confirm ownership of the purloined pudding and realising grimly that this sort of incident would never have happened in an exclusive (and exclusionary) restaurant like Simpsons in the Strand.

From Mrs Grandison's perspective this meal's lack of success (for she is not in a position to derive pleasure, as we are, from its comic surtext) can be attributed to the breaking of social codes. Lady Selvedge's determination to eat somewhere noted for cheap meals and populated mainly with low-income workers contravenes rules of hierarchy, of inclusion and exclusion. As a result, social transactions are effected across boundaries that, in Mrs Grandison's view, ought not to be crossed. In a similar though far less broadly comic scene in *A Glass of Blessings*, Sybil Forsyth leads Wilmet into a self-service restaurant for lunch, a place where Wilmet's "own fastidiousness and squeamishness would have stopped [her] from entering alone" (*GB*: 22). There is dirty crockery on the tables, the floor has the "appearance of being strewn with chips", while the other diners look "particularly unattractive" to Wilmet. And yet Sybil (whom Wilmet assures readers otherwise "knew about good food") seems at ease in these *déclassé* surroundings, examining

the lettuce in her salad with detached efficiency.

'They can't always wash it as one would at home', she explained. 'One could hardly expect them to, having to prepare so many lettuces -- just imagine it!' The examination over, she began to eat abstractedly as if she had switched her thoughts away from food entirely. (*GB*: 23)

Wilmet does not enjoy the meal at all, "imagining grit and live things [and] waiting almost with resignation for the first symptoms" of food poisoning. But this heroine, one of only two first-person narrators in Pym's canon, resembles Jane Austen's Emma in her initial selfishness and misperception of her own goodness. In all likelihood Wilmet is the character Pym had in mind when she recorded an entry in her working notebook around the time she was casting about for ideas for a new novel: (5 May 1955) "The knowledge might come to me -- and I dare say it would be a shock -- that one wasn't a particularly nice person (selfish, unsociable, uncharitable, malicious even)" (*VPE*: 272). At various times Wilmet is seen to be all these things, and both her stunted sociability and intolerant nature surface in this restaurant scene, but she receives unstructured lessons in humility and charity from others, including Sybil and Mary Beamish. In the end these 'tea-table' lessons bear results and Wilmet manages to attain a degree of self-realisation through a deeper understanding of others, most notably of Mary herself, whose past friendship Wilmet has so often devalued:

I turned over in my mind [Mary's] description of life as being a glass of blessings, and that naturally led me to think about myself. I had as much as Mary had -- there was no reason why my own life should not be a glass of blessings too. Perhaps it always had been without my realizing it. (*GB*: 252)

Sometimes even the most unpromising meals shared by the most unlikely participants still manage to afford a measure of connection. Despite the apparent ideological or ethical discord between some women in Pym's novels, the act of coming together to eat forces even the most socially inhibited into some form of relational transaction. Since the activity of sharing food "presupposes and probably helped give rise to many basic human characteristics, such as kinship systems (who

belongs with whom; which people eat together)"²⁷, it follows that in Pym's world that notion of kinship -- a favourite academic jargon phrase of hers often used with satiric effect on the anthropologists -- can link the marginalised and the socially-challenged. Viola Dace and Dulcie Mainwaring constitute this sort of dubious pairing, and the 'unskilled' meal Viola serves to Dulcie (featuring "cartons of exotic salads, cold meat wrapped in greaseproof paper, and a bag of croissants" [NFRL: 62]) helps contrast their different characters. Viola is a slovenly housekeeper and a bad cook (neither of which, it must be noted, prevent her from attracting a future husband) and the meal she serves is composed extravagantly of pre-packaged food. Dulcie, on the other hand, is a sensible heroine who can be both abject and retiring, preparing meals for herself that are studies in simplicity and elegance. The dissimilarity in their characters, analogised through this facility with food, makes for a very dubious friendship, and yet the sharing of food (on this occasion in the intimacy of Viola's flat) often leads to the sharing of confidences. Admittedly, Dulcie wishes for her knitting ("It would have added a cosiness to the occasion -- hot coffee, purring gas-fire, women knitting and talking" [NFRL: 64]) and Viola really has nothing to tell, but the relationship still represents one of mutual benefit. Viola acts as a catalyst allowing Dulcie to indulge her passion for 'finding out' about people, and it is through Dulcie's connections that Viola meets Bill Sedge and easily renounces her unrequited love for Aylwin Forbes. In the improbability of this friendship, Dulcie and Viola resemble another odd couple, Leonora and Liz in *The Sweet Dove Died*, who find requisite common ground on which to base a friendship, strengthened through the mutuality of food, despite their

²⁷ Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner*, 1-2.

boredom with each other's company and the emotional defects which prevent each from fully engaging with the other's crises. Yet for Leonora and Liz, as for Dulcie and Viola, "at the end of [an] evening each woman would feel a kind of satisfaction, as if more than just drink and food had been offered and accepted" (*SDD*: 53).

Perhaps because Pym's own realisation of the mutual value of female friendship was so hard won, having been acquired through the confidence-destroying experience of two failed love affairs, the ties that bind women together in her novels appear all the more significant. But it follows that women who are incapable of forming meaningful relationships with other women do not fare as well as those who can, and nor do they elicit sympathy from readers. Allegra Gray, of *Excellent Women*, for example -- arguably the most ruthless character in the entire Pym canon -- seems either unable or unwilling to co-exist with Winifred Malory and concocts a plan to have her removed from the vicarage. When Allegra arranges to meet with Mildred Lathbury for lunch, this at first appears to be a conventional overture meant to initiate friendship. It becomes evident, however, that in buying lunch for Mildred, Allegra means to buy her compliance; the "penetrating gaze that seemed to invite confidences" (*EW*: 117) precedes a request that Winifred live with Mildred. Allegra's gaze is not, then, a look of mutual beneficence but one of dominance and assertion.

Leonora is another character given to exerting control, who fails to summon sympathy from readers for a large part of her story mainly because of a mercenary view of her female friends: "Leonora had little use for the 'cosiness' of women friends,

but regarded them rather as a foil for herself, particularly if, as usually happened, they were less attractive and elegant than she was" (*SDD*: 49). But unlike Allegra, Leonora is the heroine of her novel and thus her experiences lead her to effect a crucial moral shift. Her trials with James engender a desire in her to spend time with her women friends (though the transformation is in keeping with Leonora's tendency toward reserve and condescension): "Now she almost welcomed Liz's interruptions or Meg's cosy chats about Colin. She was conscious of sounding quite enthusiastic as she told Meg she would be glad to see her" (*SDD*: 181). In re-establishing a connection with her women friends, in this instance through the sharing of drinks, Leonora recreates her humanity -- a requirement if readers are to care about her at all.

Jane and Prudence is a novel that celebrates the friendship of women more than any other (except perhaps for *Some Tame Gazelle*²⁸) and is appropriately titled to showcase its two heroine-friends. Their relationship is as improbable, in many ways, as any of the friendships already discussed. Jane is older, a clergyman's wife with a teenage daughter, and prone to vagueness and eccentricity evidenced by her habit of dressing in rumpled old clothing and citing quotations at inopportune moments. Prudence, on the other hand, is younger, unmarried, attractive, careful in matters of makeup and dress, and a veteran of numerous failed love affairs. The women's friendship, at times akin to a mother/daughter relationship, provides a backdrop to an examination of relationships between the sexes.²⁹ In Jane's own case, the "passion of

²⁸ The relationship of the Bede sisters could bear analysis within a study of female friendships in Pym's novels, but the comic subversion of their relationship is expressed through their associations with men, and is examined later in this chapter within the context of 'women serving food to men'.

those early days" of marriage has "faded away into mild, kindly looks and spectacles" (JP: 52), while Prudence maintains a "shrine of her past loves"; the urn containing the ashes of the latest love "deposited in the niche where it would always remain" (JP: 245). And as the novel also happens to be one of Pym's 'foodiest', the relationships among women and between women and men build upon the conceit that says 'a man needs meat', a phrase that reflects both masculine desire and feminine fulfilment. Differences in support of this decree, however, place the women in the novel either above or below a threshold of irony. Those below (whose views are actually in line with received notions of gender roles) are staunch defenders of the patriarchy and see a man's needs and desires -- even the profane ones -- as sacred. Those above, Jane in particular, maintain an ironic detachment based on a critical view of the patriarchy, and these women attempt to unravel the mysteries of the rituals of gender behaviour.

So in a novel where men and meat are symbolically linked, a lunch shared by two women in a vegetarian restaurant constitutes an act of cultural transgression, a rejection of the patriarchal meal, and the ultimate form of eating across the boundary. Jane and Prudence meet to eat at a crowded restaurant populated by other characters who, Jane notices, also appear to have come from the fringes of society: a woman

²⁹ Jane is reminiscent of Pym's own mother, while it has been suggested that Prudence is the Pym heroine most like her creator. Holt says of Irena Pym, "Jane Cleveland in *Jane and Prudence* owes a lot to her. Like Jane she was impervious to fashion and was quite happy to hoist up a sagging petticoat with a safety pin or go out in the old tweed coat she wore when feeding the chickens". Of the comparison between Pym and Prudence, Holt records that "Barbara had a great many boyfriends. She was obviously very attractive to young men and, equally obviously, revelled in her power over them. There were Stephen and Bill and Harry and Harlovin and Basil and Paul -- not surprising, really, that Barbara used to say that of all her heroines, in many ways the one she resembled most was Prudence". *A Lot to Ask*, 12, 26.

who "looked the kind of person who might have been somebody's mistress in the nineteen-twenties" and "two foreign gentlemen [...] arguing vigorously". Mounted on the wall above a table there is a photograph of a man, bearded and wearing pince-nez, "the founder of some system of diet in which the restaurant specialised". And for their 'radical' meal, Prudence orders a raw salad while Jane has a hot dish of "strange vegetables" (*JP*: 81). These choices may seem innocuous, but when placed within a cultural and historical context, they are entirely unorthodox, failing to meet the minimal requirements of the structure of a meal. But Jane and Prudence are able to frustrate cultural expectations of food consumption in this way mainly because they do not dine in the immediate company of men; they only have to please themselves.

Social anthropologist Mary Douglas has determined that the formula of a 'proper' meal consists of an entrée (a stressed main course) preceded by an appetiser and followed by a dessert (two unstressed courses). Within this formulation even "[t]he smallest, meanest meal metonymically figures the structure of the grandest, and each unit of the grand meal figures again the whole meal -- or the meanest meal".³⁰ A dinner entrée, then, is composed of the elements JTA ('joint', 'staple', 'adjunct') which refers to flesh, potato or cereal, and vegetable. A simple weekday lunch of a bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich figures the JTA structure, as does the ubiquitous ploughman's lunch of cheese, bread, and pickle. Douglas further indicates the ranking of meals, where A represents the main meal of the day (besides referring to an adjunct food element), B indicates a secondary meal, and C indicates a snack.³¹ According to

³⁰ Douglas, *Deciphering a Meal*, 257.

³¹ Mary Douglas and Michael Nicod, "Taking the Biscuit: The Structure of

British post-war working-class traditions (circa 1974), the stressed main course of an A meal was hot and savoury, centred on meat, fish, or egg, and featured a potato staple and vegetable adjunct. The weekday B meal, however, could be either hot or cold and featured as its joint (or centre) meat, fish, egg, or baked beans, a bread staple and optional adjunct (the higher classes were more likely to have B meals centred on choice meat and fish, sometimes on egg, and rarely on baked beans³²). Douglas observes that "[t]he rules for structuring course one of an A meal are absolutely strict", while the discretion to change or omit elements in the B meal are limited. "This 'food event'", she explains, "cannot be recognised as a meal in the system unless its first course is constituted on these rules. Some elements can be duplicated, but none omitted".³³ So, according to this formula, vegetarian meals are not recognised by the system because they are centred on adjuncts and omit both joint and staple.

British Meals", *New Society* (30) 19 December 1974: 745. I can find no record that Pym was familiar with the research of Mary Douglas, but no doubt the novelist would have eagerly embraced the anthropologist's studies. This one is especially full of the sort of richness that Pym relished: "As the hat to the coat, as the rhyme-end to a line of verse, the British biscuit is a summing up and completion. It is the nearest thing to a stop signal, saying that eating must come to an end", 747. Pym would have thrilled to the controversy that Douglas' studies instigated as well (and might have felt an affinity with her for the nature of the criticism levelled at Douglas' work). Phyllis Passariello relates how "Douglas' microcultural descriptions have been criticized as trivial", recording how, when "Taking the Biscuit" was published in 1974, it "promptly received the equivalent of the Golden Fleece award for useless research". "Stupid, ridiculous, trivial, fundamental [...] Douglas and Nicod have been ridiculed for referring to gravy as 'liquid dressing' or seriously discussing 'potato events' and 'bread and cake events'", 57, 59.

³² For more on elements of a meal in relation to class and income level, see John Burnett, 311-12.

³³ Douglas and Nicod, "Taking the Biscuit", 746.

The 'system' Douglas refers to is essentially a patriarchal one where men are the heads of households; the irreversibility of this meal structure can be linked directly to the patriarch's presence at the table. As Douglas points out, "[i]f the father came home on weekdays for his midday meal, it was a B meal [and] the family crammed the whole of the Sunday meal system into the last part of its day, after his final return from work".³⁴ In a culture which supports a hierarchy of food, with meat ranked highest within the hierarchy, it follows that this food element is viewed as a symbol of male prestige, prosperity, and even virility. Only the 'Other' could consume a meal centred on something other than meat. As Jane observes in the vegetarian restaurant, the 'Other' may be represented by women, foreigners, or even eccentrics given to the development of alternative diets. Julia Twigg specifies, though, that "vegetarian food is [...] *female food* in the grammar of conventional eating".³⁵ And because food is viewed as a symbolic buttress of cultural systems, taboos and restrictions serve to prevent violation of the system, to ensure the grammar of conventional eating remains unchanged. Transgression poses a threat to the system's stability, and vegetarianism constitutes just such a threat since it proposes an alternate system of power and valuation. Vegetarianism "does more than rebuke a *meat-eating* society", Carol J. Adams suggests, "it rebukes a *patriarchal* society, since [...] meat-eating is associated with male power".³⁶ In this way, vegetarianism is often linked to feminist activism.³⁷

³⁴ Douglas and Nicod, "Taking the Biscuit", 745.

³⁵ Twigg, 27.

³⁶ Adams, 178.

³⁷ Mervyn Nicholson notes that "[f]eminists have often advocated vegetarianism, patriarchy being identified with predation literally as well as metaphorically", 198; Evelyn Hinz observes that "the dietetic challenging of the old hegemony of meat and the championing of vegetables sheds an interesting perspective on the presence of vegetarianism in the work of feminist writers", viii; and Julia Twigg records that

Pym's narrative strategy, based on comic or ironic realism, partly builds on what Adams refers to as a 'phenomenology of vegetarianism'.³⁸ Adams' theory posits that a vegetarian consciousness is so entwined with a search for alternate forms of articulation and the recuperation of language that its paradigm may be found in literary consciousness itself where, she suggests, "a phenomenology of vegetarianism recapitulates the phenomenology of writing: of seizing language, of identifying gaps and silences".³⁹ Feminist vegetarianism marks female autonomy and signals the repudiation of a culture of male dominance. Feminist vegetarian texts translate meat-eating into a metaphor for women's oppression and propose an alternative world view. Pym's texts satirise a patriarchal obsession with meat and de-mythologise the power of meat and men. In so doing, she demonstrates that a woman's needs are no less important than a man's, even as her texts indicate that knowledge of the truth underlying these myths does not necessarily bring about changes in patterns of gender behaviour. Pym's 'double-voiced' narrative, described by Charles Burkhart as a voice "above that presents and one below that comments [where the] distance between the two is the distance of irony"⁴⁰, manages to be both critical *and* socially affirming.

So while Jane and Prudence's unheralded visit to the vegetarian restaurant might not exactly qualify as feminist activism, this vegetarian scene of eating does offer a vital counterpoint to the cult of meat-eating that pervades the text. The importance of meat to the structure of the meal is parodied through the importance of

"vegetarianism has had links to feminism from at least the 1880s", 27-8.

³⁸ Adams, 184.

³⁹ Adams, 184.

⁴⁰ Burkhart, *The Pleasure of Miss Pym*, 72.

meat to the structure of the novel. It is symbolic that Jane and Prudence's friendship is confirmed within the environment of the vegetarian restaurant where they temporarily forego the conventional 'worship' of meat. At the beginning of the novel, Jane ponders the cultural obsession with meat: "like meat offered to idols" (*JP*: 21).⁴¹ This observation metonymically re-figures the text's mantra, 'a man needs meat', illustrating the zealousness which characterises female veneration of male privilege (recalling the scene in the café where Nicholas receives more food than Jane does, leaving her quietly bemused by "[t]his insistence on a man's needs" [*JP*: 56]). Later in the novel, after Prudence has been dropped by Fabian and has formed a new romantic attachment, the friends meet again in the vegetarian restaurant to ruminate upon the events of the past few weeks. Curiously, Jane notices the same marginalised characters from her first visit -- the woman who could have been someone's mistress in the nineteen-twenties and the bearded foreign gentlemen. The embarrassment she experiences in thinking about being somebody's mistress leads her to poke around rather violently in her shredded cabbage salad, and she wonders aloud "if anyone ever finds a caterpillar or something like that" (*JP*: 246) -- further proof of Pym's facility for lampooning male sexuality, reminiscent of the scene of the caterpillar segment found in Miss Prior's cauliflower cheese in *Some Tame Gazelle*.

Even more significantly, in terms of Jane's deflation of the archaic male ego, following the meal she meets the new object of Prudence's romantic interest, an

⁴¹ Jane quotes from St. Paul here.

"ordinary and colourless" Geoffrey Manifold, who confirms Jane in her theory about an economy of sexual attraction:

that was why women were so wonderful; it was their love and imagination that transformed these unremarkable beings. For most men, when one came to think of it, were undistinguished to look at, if not positively ugly. Fabian was an exception, and perhaps love affairs with handsome men tended to be less stable because so much less sympathy and imagination were needed on the women's part? (*JP*: 247)

Jane does not find the opportunity to share this insight with Prudence, and yet one feels that the realisation still helps to convey their relationship to a higher plane. And though the novel essentially parodies a romantic structure, for Jane's attempts at matchmaking Prudence and Fabian are frustrated when he 'falls prey' to Jessie Morrow, it concludes on a hopeful note. Prudence, re-confirmed in her powers of attraction, is "overwhelmed by the richness of her life" (*JP*: 252), while Jane devises a new plan for matchmaking Prudence and Edward Lyall, a man whose suitability she had not considered previously since his mother seemed to hold the key to his tastes.⁴²

The portrayal of the friendship between Jane and Prudence, like other successful female friendships featured in the novels, functions on two levels. First, it provides a framework in which to make sense of a feminine-gendered existence, in which this existence comes to assume a familiarity. It celebrates, too, the potential of emotionally-equal relationships between women, often represented through a stock Pymian phrase, the 'sharing of confidences'. This sort of sharing is, of course, predicated upon the sharing of food: "[s]ince friends and families share food, the

⁴² When Jane first meets Mrs Lyall, the woman divulges Edward's breakfast regime: he "likes coffee and cereal of some kind. He might have a boiled egg or a rasher of bacon occasionally...". The admission causes Jane to turn away, "feeling that she was not worthy to receive these sacred revelations of his tastes" (*JP*: 102).

action of eating together can ritually express what is held, shared, and enjoyed, after all, in common".⁴³ Second, same-sex friendships facilitate a dialogue on the nature of relationships between the sexes, on the enigmatic trinity of men, marriage, and romance, and on the slim rewards that any of these seems to offer to the devout.

Admittedly, however, the scene of women eating together in the novels is not as common as the scene of women eating alone -- an indication that the problematic of 'transaction' of any sort is an overriding concern in Pym's fictional universe. When eating alone, some of Pym's heroines further devalue man's meat by consciously eating 'down' the food scale, or by serving meat in an adulterated form -- economical, as one would expect from Pym's common-sense heroines, and in accordance with received notions of feminine restraint. Still other heroines (Prudence being a noted example) indulge their appetites in ways that resemble an almost masculine self-interest. In either case, as seen in the examination that follows, eating alone involves a degree of *jouissance* that can replace or supersede the pleasure derived from interaction with another, wherein food consumption comes to represent the abjection of desire.

'A Sort of Fleshy Narcissism': Abjection and the Lone Female Consumer

Janice Rossen ventures that "Pym's emphasis on the joys of solitude", including solitary eating, is "more interesting than her treatment of relationships between women", while Jane Nardin believes the way in which Pym routinely writes about eating alone as one of life's 'pleasures' sets her apart from other writers.⁴⁴ And yet,

⁴³ Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner*, 86-7.

⁴⁴ Rossen, *The World of Barbara Pym*, 59; Nardin, 21.

while there is no doubt that both joy and pleasure do play a role in the solitary scene of eating in Pym's novels, Margaret Visser's research into food and foodways leads her to contend that few people among Western cultures "willingly eat always alone".⁴⁵ For most, the pleasure to be had from eating arises from the opportunity it affords one to relax, to join companions of choice for a break, and to communicate through the process of a shared activity, all of which helps to consolidate relationships. Those who habitually find pleasure in eating alone abnegate the pleasure of communicating through the process of sharing food with others. Indeed, the pleasure they derive from food seems to supersede the emotions evoked through personal interaction.

The self-serving desires of Prudence bear witness to this theory. A working notebook entry suggests "Prudence wanted a dinner by candlelight, exquisitely cooked, perhaps by herself. In a velvet dress with antique garnet jewellery".⁴⁶ In the novel version she cooks an indulgent meal for one before retiring for the night with a book describing "a love affair in the fullest sense of the word and sparing no detail":

Although she was alone, it was not a meal to be ashamed of. There was a little garlic in the oily salad and the cheese was nicely ripe. The table was laid with all the proper accompaniments and the coffee that followed the meal was not made out of a tin or bottle. (*JP*: 51)

And after being jilted by Fabian, Prudence consoles herself with a solitary meal in a restaurant ("rather expensive, but frequented mainly by women, so that she felt no embarrassment at being alone") of smoked salmon, slices of chicken breast, and the promise of a "really ripe, yellow-fleshed peach" (*JP*: 225). The resulting effect is that

⁴⁵ Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner*, 23.

⁴⁶ MS PYM 41, folio 17 verso.

of "a sort of fleshy narcissism", as Michael Cotsell phrases it: "[f]rom attendance on a handsome man, Prudence has moved to attendance on a handsome woman".⁴⁷

Essentially speaking, Prudence is a sensualist, though the most pleasing sensations she arouses are mainly self-induced. Others among Pym's heroines are somewhat stingier with their emotions, being resigned to living lives where pleasure is fleeting and of a decidedly trivial sort. Rocky Napier, in *Excellent Women*, could be speaking for many of them when he says, "I'm afraid women take their pleasures very sadly" (*EW*: 129). Mildred Lathbury, for example, indulges in brief flights of fancy, even considering all the people she knows who could be described as splendid and romantic (she thinks of two -- Rocky himself and Everard Bone, both of whom she has only recently come to know). Her romantic reverie concludes when she "[creeps] quietly back to [her] flat" and offers an unvarnished assessment of her current social prospects: "Saturday night... perhaps it was right that [the house] should be [empty] and I sitting alone eating a very small chop" (*EW*: 63). Mildred's very small chop operates as a metaphor to her solitary state and functions as penance; it is as though she must mortify the flesh for indulging in 'sinful' thoughts of romance and splendour.

Mildred, the quintessential 'Excellent Woman' -- self-effacing, resourceful, modest in physical desires -- represents one end of the Pymian heroines' spectrum, while Prudence -- self-serving, affected, narcissistic -- represents the other. This spectrum manifests a common thread in a sublimated expression of desire, what

⁴⁷ Cotsell, 61.

Robert Graham calls "overt love-displacement"⁴⁸, where desire is directed at objects like clothing, material possessions, and food. In this way, female appetite in particular can be seen as a metonym of feminine desire. And yet the lives of these heroines are engendered not so much by desire as by exclusion, characterised by withdrawal; they are observers rather than participants. Their lives are hemmed in by abjection where boundaries are protected from sublimation by the 'Other' through disgust or revulsion. "Revulsion", Mervyn Nicholson explains, "is a response to involuntary *participation* in the lifestyle -- one is part of it, not outside it".⁴⁹ This theory accords with Pym's tendency to force her heroines to 'turn away' with a 'womanly delicacy' when faced with the exigencies of the male appetite, particularly when men eat meat. For these women, it is one thing to plan and prepare a man's meal and another to be confronted with the enormity of the male appetite, where 'woman' figures as the absent referent in the phrase 'a man needs meat'. And since food functions as sexual symbol in the novels, it follows that sexual conflicts are displaced through it. What Andrew Motion has observed of Philip Larkin's novel *Jill* could also be noted of Pym's novels: sexual conflicts are covertly figured, existing "as speculative yearnings or as patterns of imagery, especially imagery to do with food".⁵⁰ The Pymian scene of women eating alone articulates these yearnings through an ambiguous mix of pleasure and anxiety.

⁴⁸ For some reason Graham overlooks food when he says "overt love-displacement in Pym's fiction appears more actively linked to home and garden than to causes or pets", though perhaps for him food falls within the category of 'home', "Cumbered With Much Serving", 150.

⁴⁹ Nicholson, 196; he adds, "[m]etaphoric eating becomes participation in a divine identity freed from the contingencies of the lifecycle of copulation, pregnancy, birth, eating, excreting, more copulating -- and dying and putrefaction", 197.

⁵⁰ Motion, 157.

When Catherine Oliphant thinks of pleasure, she conjoins food and solitude:

Oh, what a joy to get a real calf's foot from the butcher, she thought, and not have to cheat by putting in gelatin. The small things of life were so much bigger than the great things, she decided, wondering how many writers and philosophers had said this before her, the trivial pleasures like cooking, one's home, little poems, especially the sad ones, solitary walks, funny things seen and overheard. (*LA*: 99)

In this scene Catherine does not eat alone but talks to Tom as she prepares a classic *boeuf à la mode*, and it is Tom's indifference which causes her to "[turn] back silently" to her cooking and muse on the joys of a real calf's foot and other trivialities. For all that Tom offers by his presence Catherine might as well be alone, and she realises that an eighteen month separation while Tom pursued his anthropological research in Africa has rendered them strangers to each other and forced Catherine to turn "in upon herself and her own resources" (*LA*: 99). But her response to Tom's inattention typifies the Pymian principle of pleasure, which is edged by consolation. Trivial things offer Catherine a consolatory pleasure when matters of importance, like the companionship of a significant other, fail to provide the satisfaction once promised.

Catherine lists cooking, which no doubt includes eating, as a trivial pleasure, and cooks for and shares many meals with Tom. Indeed, it is while waiting for the *boeuf à la mode* to cook that the couple decides to dine out at the nearby Cypriot restaurant. But Catherine's cooking skills are not enough to bind Tom to her -- he claims she fails to understand him and deserts her for Deirdre. Later, his absence forces Catherine to confront again the dubious 'pleasures' of cooking and eating alone, once she has already suffered the ignominy of discovering Tom and Deirdre in that same Cypriot restaurant; Catherine struggles home, her string bag "laden with exotic foods she had bought in Soho", when she spies Tom and Deirdre at a corner table.

Unseen by the couple, Catherine abstractedly purchases a bottle of cheap wine while her thoughts pointedly turn to food as consolation: "I'm not one of those *excellent* women, who can just go home and eat a boiled egg and make a cup of tea and be very splendid [...] but how useful it would be if I were!" (LA: 102).

Being 'splendid', of course, is a well-documented Pymian occupation and the stock-in-trade of the Excellent Woman, but Catherine's representation of an Excellent Woman's consolatory meal tempers somewhat the notion of the pleasure encountered in eating alone.⁵¹ Among Pym's fifteen or so heroines only a handful are married or live with companions, which would suggest that the majority of these women commonly eat alone, and not from choice but from circumstance. Often there is little inherent pleasure, or lack of it, connected with this activity: eating is primarily a necessity. Outside of food's obvious nutritive function, however, for most of these women solitary meals bear a psychological burden, supporting one through crisis as Catherine imagines it, or providing the ballast that restores equilibrium, as seen when Mildred cooks herself cod, "a suitable dish for a rejected one and [eaten] humbly without any kind of sauce or relish" (EW: 126), when she learns of Julian Malory's engagement to Allegra Gray. Mildred admits that she finds cooking for herself a bother: "I like food [...] but I suppose on the whole women don't make such a business of living as men do" (EW: 32). In light of this judgement, it is

⁵¹ Annette Weld notes: "[Pym] has a personal collection of words that carry specialised meaning, identifiable by the faithful reader. Critic Rosemary Dinnage notices that '*splendid* which might mean something quite different, to her means being stoical in dreary circumstances'. *Suitable*, another favourite approbation, connotes much more than mere propriety for the occasion, falling just short of *excellent*", 103.

understandable that Prudence's self-indulgence seems to connote a somewhat more masculine logic than Mildred's feminine self-restraint, for Prudence is one of those heroines inclined to 'make a business of living'. For many of Pym's Excellent Women, however, the pleasures of solitary eating are ambiguous and transitory, while the scene of eating alone represents a composite site of condemnation and yearning.

The sort of food consumed by the lone woman, indexed to the signs and drives that structure a gendered existence, helps inform the pleasure (or, alternatively, the displeasure) associated with eating. "Because relations of eating are metonymic for relations of social power"⁵², it generally follows that the sort of food women turn to when in the company of other women also prevails when they eat alone. Diet consciousness in Pym's texts elaborates a hierarchical continuum linking gender and food, where cultural subordinates traditionally eat 'down' the food scale. Generally speaking, Pymian women's solitary meals are composed of variations on eggs, cheese, fish, chicken, plain vegetables, and tea, with the odd reference to red meat (often boiled or served in some adulterated form) -- "the kind of food calculated to bring anyone back down to earth again", as determined by Jessie Morrow (*CH*: 89).

Catherine, for example, imagines a boiled egg to be suitable fare for an Excellent Woman coping with anxiety. Being derived from female animals, eggs are classified as secondary or feminised protein, and it is through a simple homology that they are prescribed as appropriate to a woman's diet. Viewed as symbols of purity

⁵² Nicholson, 198.

and simplicity, they are normally consumed unfertilised, are bloodless, and death is not incidental to their harvesting, so eggs do not recall the same politics of power we associate with meat.⁵³ Within Catherine's formulation of the Excellent Woman's crisis meal, the egg is boiled which intensifies its symbolism as 'safe' food. Boiling purifies and sterilises as much as it cooks, while the edible interior of a boiled egg replicates the shape and colour of the inedible exterior, allying the final, mediated product with the food in its raw, unmediated state. To the human gaze, boiled and raw eggs are virtually identical, where the boiled egg "conforms to an established taxonomy" of what is pure and undefiled; it is the impure, Kristeva cautions, which discomposes that taxonomy through intermixture and disorder.⁵⁴

It is curious, then, as Catherine warms to the subject of boiled eggs and tea meant to bolster the Excellent Woman in the face of disaster, that she rejects the notion of her own 'excellence' and instead pictures herself with scrambled eggs and coffee. In this instance (unlike that of the woman on the train who orders coffee in favour of Pepsi) coffee *is* the radical alternative, dark and arousing, while tea suggests the comfort of conservatism. And when the psychologically battered Catherine craves eggs -- an appropriately feminine desire -- she imagines them scrambled instead,

⁵³ Modern egg production offers its own version of power politics; Emma registers her complaint about farming chickens, battery style: "There's something not natural about it. The confinement of the birds" (*FGL*: 155). Furthermore, some cultures link eggs with constructions of female power based on their potential to engender life. In these cultures, men avoid consuming eggs for fear that they may deplete their innate masculine power, while in other cultures, women are prohibited from consuming them as it is felt women are unable to assimilate such richly 'condensed' reserves of feminine power. See Visser, *Much Depends on Dinner*, 121; and Simoons, 65-74.

⁵⁴ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 98.

disordered and altered violently as she is by betrayal, so they no longer retain their pure, unadulterated form. But Catherine cannot think of anyone who can provide her with the meal she fantasises about, and she seeks refuge instead in a self-service restaurant full of women, helping herself to suitable "welsh rarebit and bread-and-butter and", strangely, "a little cake shaped like a boat", which may represent the first stage in Catherine's physical and emotional 'voyage' away from Tom (*LA*: 103).

Through their penchant for renunciation, heroines closer to the 'Excellent' end of the spectrum rarely make an extra effort when preparing food for themselves.⁵⁵ Catherine, for example, always fantasises about or consumes eggs in their simplest forms: poached, boiled, or scrambled. Mildred feels she eats immoderately because she prepares herself a lunch of not one but two scrambled eggs (*EW*: 200-1). Emma Howick, while speculating about other lone dinner preparations, musing about others who "make do with a bit of cheese or [opening] a tin of something", prepares herself an omelette --

the kind of thing that every woman is supposed to turn her hand to, but something was wrong with Emma's omelette this evening -- the eggs not beaten enough, the tablespoon of water omitted, something was not as it should be. But she was hungry enough and did not care enough to analyse what her mistake could have been. It was better not to be too fussy, especially if one lived alone [...] (*FGL*: 14-15)

Pym's novels constitute a record of sorts of the changing tastes of British society as it burgeons over nearly three decades, following on from post-war rationing. The early

⁵⁵ Janice Rossen notes, however, that "[m]aintaining dignity during solitary meals must be a strong tenet for both Barbara Pym and her sister Hilary (who is an excellent cook). On more than one occasion, when I have had the pleasure of dining with her, she has confessed that she thinks it ridiculous that one would not take trouble over preparing a meal just because one was alone", *The World of Barbara Pym*, 182fn.

novels, written during a period of domestic consolidation, feature traditional English egg dishes, omelettes being virtually unknown at this time.⁵⁶ But as Emma is the most contemporary of Pym's heroines, her food choices reflect the advent of a global community, while her poor attempt at a foreign dish represents an underlying anxiety over change. Emma appears not to care whether the omelette is properly made, and nor does she wish to investigate the cause of her error in order to avoid repetition. A solitary woman feels it is not worth the fuss. And having betrayed her 'lowness' through carelessness, she can sink no further than to drink red wine "from a bottle already started, which had been warming by the side of the storage heater all the weekend" (*FGL*: 15). While Emma's difficulties may represent Pym's indictment of the shortcomings of British cuisine, more telling is this depiction of a lone woman's efforts in preparing food when she is *not* committed to attend to the desires of a man.

When Emma ponders what other people who live alone might be eating, she imagines some "make do with a bit of cheese". In Victorian British society, cheese was not considered suitable for consumption by young women; such rules of etiquette ensured that their breath would remain pleasant to men.⁵⁷ By the Second World War, however, due to the exigencies of rationing and a demand for alternative proteins, cheese had become established as a viable basis for a meal and considered more agreeable as a source of protein for women. Pym's women are drawn to a curious concoction of cheese, bread, and beer known as 'welsh rarebit', which became, during

⁵⁶ John Burnett states that a 1958 National Food Survey indicated that "omelettes were so rare as to be unclassified", 351.

⁵⁷ Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner*, 279.

war time, a popular food choice for those unable to obtain meat. Theodora Fitzgibbon records that during the war the weekly one ounce ration of cheese was often illegally augmented by swapping excess rations of sugar and tea, but as the cheese was often of the "uninteresting" mousetrap variety it was best made into welsh rarebit with a little beer.⁵⁸ Catherine finds this a fortifying dish and chooses it in the self-service restaurant where she seeks refuge after discovering Tom with Deirdre. Ianthe Broome also chooses welsh rarebit when alone but as she is slightly more refined than Catherine (she gets hers at a café run by gentlewomen), one imagines it is the variation made with milk or cream rather than beer. Dulcie's housekeeper, Miss Lord -- happiest when discussing food -- haunts a variety of local restaurants with a critical eye to heating and layout. On one of her excursions to a new locale she turns up the ultimate woman's meal in "egg on welsh" (*NFRL*: 33), an embarrassment of riches in this period following closely on the heels of rationing.

Within the hierarchy of food white meat figures immediately above feminised protein, with fish considered somewhat less exalted than poultry.⁵⁹ The pale flesh of fish, its seeming bloodlessness, and its watery origins engender its associations with the feminine. Although Catherine does not include it within her paradigmatic menu presented to the Excellent Woman in a time of crisis, many other Pym heroines do consume fish in the course of their "dear, little narrow lives", and with good reason --

⁵⁸ Theodora Fitzgibbon, *With Love*; cited in Colin Spencer, *The Heretic's Feast* (London: Fourth Estate, 1993), 315.

⁵⁹ Certain types of fish -- rare species, fish captured in sport, or fish that possesses pink or orange flesh -- may occupy a higher position within the hierarchy than inexpensive white fish or ubiquitous chicken.

fish is a characteristically feminine food.⁶⁰ Visser corroborates this "myth of fish as 'female' food", noting how it is "tender, pale, and not too copious". Elaborating on how its consumption requires "a delicate manner of eating", she refers to an account of fish consumption by Pierre Bourdieu:

Fish 'tends to be regarded as an unsuitable food for men' [...] It 'has to be eaten in a way which totally contradicts the masculine way of eating -- that is, with restraint, in small mouthfuls, chewed gently with the front of the mouth, on the tips of the teeth' (because of bones). The manner in which one must remove the bones with the fingers and deposit them on the plate is correspondingly fastidious. Fish makes one 'nibble and pick', like a woman, and prevents 'wholehearted male gulps'.⁶¹

The qualities that render fish suitable as 'female food' strengthen its ties to the sacred.

Fish has long been considered a suitable dish for a collation (a light meal in a period of fasting), an idea that greatly appealed to Pym.⁶² She was fascinated by the doctrine of fish consumption on Fridays: "Reading a biography of Edmund Campion on a Friday over lunch one feels bound to eat fish".⁶³ So when Mildred chooses cod without sauce as a suitable meal for a lone rejected woman, here the feminine conjoins with the sacred. Though Mildred has not been rejected at all -- *she* never wanted to marry Julian though she knew others expected it -- she follows a gender script and eats in fulfilment of expectations. Wilmet, too, considers fish suitable for a rejected woman. Fearing that Piers Longridge has failed to keep a dinner engagement, she sits alone and amuses herself by composing a fantasy menu for the rejected woman: "it 'might start with the very thinnest of soups and go on to plain boiled fish with no sauce"

⁶⁰ Ivy Compton-Burnett characterised her own existence with Margaret Jourdain in this way, while it offers an apt description of the lives of Pym's heroines; cited in Liddell, "Two Friends: Barbara Pym and Ivy Compton-Burnett", 66.

⁶¹ Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner*, 314.

⁶² "Lowering one's sights from meat to fish [is] an exercise in humility, and designed to raise consciousness by elected self-restraint, and by forcing oneself to remember", Visser, *Much Depends on Dinner*, 151-2.

⁶³ MS PYM 44, folio 16 recto.

(GB: 68).⁶⁴ According to the doctrine of Pymian sexual relations, then, fish is suitable penitent's fare for commission of the 'sin' of being deemed unworthy by others.

Chicken also manifests links to both gender and the sacred, underscoring its particular significance for the female consumer in Pym's novels. The implications of chicken signify through its greater mythical importance in other cultural contexts, where the consumption of it is often hedged in by taboo and proscription. Frederick Simoons records, for example, how the Kafa of Ethiopia make slaves of women who break the rule against eating chicken, while in other African societies chicken is considered suitable only for female consumption.⁶⁵ In Pym's novels, it is the manner in which chicken is prepared and served that conveys meaning, so that women (especially lone ones) are wont to dine judiciously upon slices of chicken breast, as Prudence does for her consolatory meal after the Fabian affair. Slices of breast -- tender, white, boneless -- are far enough removed from the absent referent (the actual chicken) that they are unlikely to elicit an abject response in the feminine consumer. A 'whole bird', however, is another matter, and rituals of sublimation must be observed when chicken is served in this way. Boiling a fowl uses water to mediate between the chicken and the masculine effects of fire. But whole chicken still tends

⁶⁴ Wilmet's imagination is influenced by her status within an advantaged social class and she is unaccustomed to either rejection or material restraint. Typically, her menu composition for the rejected woman begins humbly enough, but she thinks of an alternative: "[perhaps] it was thought that a rejected woman needed to be cosseted and all the specialities of the house would be produced, everything flambé in liqueurs..." (GB: 68).

⁶⁵ Simoons explains further: "The feelings associated with the avoidance of chickens and eggs in Africa vary considerably from place to place. Among some groups they are strong, even violent, and are supported by severe sanctions. Among others they simply involve mild disapproval", 73.

toward the ambiguous through its affinity with a vulnerable femininity in the exposed breast and thighs, and through the 'humanness' of the carcass, described by Deirdre as "all hollow inside and domed like the roof of a cathedral" (*LA*: 52). This ambiguity makes it a far more appropriate food item for serving to men. Clergymen are traditionally served whole boiled chicken enrobed in a surplice of cream sauce, a ritual whose significance leads Belinda to wonder about "[t]he coldness, the whiteness, the muffling with sauce, perhaps even the sharpness added by the slices of lemon, there was something appropriate here, even if Belinda could not see exactly what it was" (*STG*: 11). Roast chicken is even more manly, and when Mr Oliver receives a plate laden with it, Jane feels compelled to turn away, "to save his embarrassment" (*JP*: 57). The overt sexual symbolism evident in the male appetite for meat provokes this abjection in Jane, leading her to inoculate herself against her own unease by engaging in ironic play with the text's mantra of male needs: "Man needs bird, she thought".

Red meat occupies the most exalted position within the hierarchy of foods, and while Pym's women acknowledge this, often serving meat to others, they rarely eat it in notable quantities when alone. Mildred does have a small chop on a lonely Saturday night, and Ianthe consumes one as well, with the proper accompaniments:

Ianthe was not the type to pour herself a glass of sherry or gin as soon as she got home after a day's work, nor yet to make a cup of tea. One did not make tea at half-past six in the evening like the 'working classes', as her mother would have called them. Instead she set about cooking herself a suitable supper in the almost too perfect little kitchen. The grill was heated for a chop, tomatoes were cut up, and a packet of frozen peas tipped out of its wrapping into a saucepan. 'We have come to this', her mother used to say, 'eating frozen vegetables like *Americans*'. [...] Frozen vegetables were, somehow, a lowering of standards, but they were quick and convenient and really fresher than anything one could get in the London shops". (*UA*: 30)

This passage is key to the establishment of Ianthe's gentility of character and helps set up the contrast with John Challow that underpins the novel's central tenet -- the 'unsuitable attachment'. The chop, referred to only in passing, is overshadowed by a confusion of other ideas and images: Ianthe's conservatism and refinement, the intrusive memory of her mother, the degradation of British tradition, and the way in which the passive voice makes it seem as though the 'almost too perfect' Ianthe does not actually cook the meal but that it prepares itself. But the notion that Ianthe and Mildred grill chops rather than, say, steaks, is critical. In the entire canon not one of Pym's women is seen to be eating steak alone, though some do eat beef when dining in the company of men.⁶⁶ Ianthe's discreet chop serves as evidence of the fact that, like most Pym heroines, she is not "a great meat-eater", as her aunt Bertha attests (UA: 91-2). Such abstemiousness in meat-eating is a sign of moral rectitude, extending from the archaic logic that vegetarian food has a reputation for being "*less* defiling, [thus indicating] a view of meat as *more* associated with love of profanity".⁶⁷

Profanity and meat are mutually inclusive, and meat at or near the top of the hierarchy bears the potential to be more profane. And yet it is not just the type of

⁶⁶ Mrs Grandison fantasises about "a cut off a splendid sirloin" in anticipation of her meal out with Lady Selvedge, but her expectations are frustrated by the latter's meanness (UA: 56).

⁶⁷ Fiddes, *Meat*, 205. He adds: "Meat is the food most strongly proscribed on fast-days: days when the greater glory of God is especially to be honoured [...] This goes back at least to medieval days, when rejection of meat by the devout occurred in a context of denial of the flesh that drew directly on manichaeian conceptions of bodily affairs as 'totally evil, all nature as corruption, and the cessation of physical being as the proper end' (Twigg 1983: 19). [...] The church has a long history of commending its avoidance when spiritual control is held to be the particular ambition of good Christians".

meat (in other words, the type of animal it is derived from), but also the manner in which it is prepared and served that influences meat's placement within the hierarchy:

Sausages, cooked pies, chopped ham, corned beef, or pâtés [...] rarely enjoy the same prestige as a piece of proper meat. Except in cases of hardship, they are better suited to the day's secondary meal, or perhaps as an appetiser at the main event. These lower-status meats may be seen as more appropriate to children than to Real Men who need real meat [...] Such items provide us with animal flesh in accessible form, but much of meat's peculiar mystique is dissipated in the process.⁶⁸

War-time and post-war rationing qualifies as 'hardship' and partly explains why these lesser meat dishes feature heavily in Pym's early novels, reflecting a heightened concern for food in general during periods of restraint; as Humphrey Boyce puts it, "You know how obsessed one was with food during the war" (*SDD*: 36). But Nick Fiddes' analysis of the status of meat presents a glaring oversight: lower-status meats may be seen as more appropriate to *women* than to men who need meat, and mainly because the processing of meat symbolically figures a diminished male power. Pym's men need the 'mystique' of meat, while her women fear it *and* are fascinated by it.

In eating 'down' the hierarchical food scale, away from the ambivalent power, Pym's heroines meet cultural expectations of gender, subscribing to traditional notions of femininity, including modesty in physical desires. At the same time, though, in locating pleasure within this lowly scene of eating, these women unbalance the scale -- shepherd's pie as a slice of subversion -- destabilising the myths of the patriarchal meal and undermining those who invest in its symbolism. It is in this way that the scene of solitary eating in Pym's novels encodes a message of inclusion and exclusion, of pleasure and anxiety, of the simultaneously thrilling and threatening. A meagre supper

⁶⁸ Fiddes, *Meat*, 88-9.

consisting of "a crusty French loaf, cheese, and lettuce and tomatoes from the garden" lies low on the scale, qualifying as something French peasants eat, as Dulcie acknowledges. But she defends her "classically simple" meal choice as something "enlightened English people sometimes enjoy rather self-consciously" (*NFRL*: 56). In the end, perhaps Dulcie's choice speaks more of pathos than politics ('sexual' or 'class') since she forswears the conventional adjuncts of wine and dressing of oil and vinegar in favour of orange squash and mayonnaise from a bottle, but as she eats alone she can afford to eschew the power politics of food. When Mildred makes herself "what seemed an extravagant lunch of two scrambled eggs, preceded by the remains of some soup and followed by cheese, biscuits and an apple" (*EW*: 200), she confesses that the meal exceeds her needs. Still, she is glad she is not a man, "or the kind of man who looked upon a meal alone as a good opportunity to cook a small plover", realising how her meal would fail to meet masculine requirements. But Mildred, like Dulcie, not only accepts but embraces the notion that power does not accrue to those who eat alone, while proving that there is pleasure to be found in exclusion.

Jane Nardin notes how "[s]everal of Pym's novels suggest that frustration of desire can sometimes, in its own way, be a pleasurable state of being", citing a diary entry of Pym's as support: "The lunch you didn't have with him will be more wonderful than all the past ones".⁶⁹ What Nardin gestures towards is an awareness of

⁶⁹ Nardin, 19. The diary entry recalls another that locates pleasure in the unrequited: (8 June 1932) "I met [Geoffrey] coming down the steps -- we were all alone -- I longed to crash into him or drop my books -- but the incident was over -- and became one of the many might-have-beens -- about which it's so lovely to speculate", MS PYM 101, folio 29 recto.

an abject consciousness among Pym's women, demonstrated through exclusion of the nutritive and/or the sexual. Since abjection involves a "recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded"⁷⁰, the location of pleasure in the frustration of desire implies an understanding of, and even a fascination for, that which is denied or excluded. For Pym's heroines who habitually eat alone, food becomes a repository of desire and the pleasure derived from the indulgence of one's own appetite replaces the pleasure normally experienced in relational transactions, through inclusion. Additionally, though, food must be recognised as a symbol of the desire of others, and in a culture which declares that 'a man needs meat', this food item is seen to represent male desire, fuelling abjection among the fearful and the fascinated. We see this response in Jane, for example, who physically 'turns away' on two occasions when confronted with the evidence of men's appetites: once when she witnesses Mr Oliver eating roast chicken ("A man needs bird"), and again when Mrs Lyall discloses the "sacred revelations" of Edward's breakfast routine (*JP*: 102) -- an incident that inspires a fourth variation on the mantra of male needs when Miss Doggett declares, "I think a man needs a cooked breakfast". Prudence also abjectly withdraws when she accidentally intrudes on the male scene of eating, "for there was something indecent about it, as if a mantle had fallen and revealed more of [the man] than she ought to see" (*JP*: 46).⁷¹ Her response is as visceral as if she had spied Geoffrey masturbating. Later, when he mentions that he could have eaten more,

⁷⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 5.

⁷¹ See the reference from this scene that concludes Chapter 2. In a working notebook entry, Pym tests the notion of the heroine's abjection: "A man on the staff -- the only one except for Gramp[ian]. He goes furtively to his lunch -- perhaps to a pub or more manly place. But one day our heroine sees him in the queue of Lyons' help yourself. The mantle falls. She averts her eyes", MS PYM 41, folio 15 verso.

Prudence responds, "'You men have such enormous appetites', [...] conscious of being rather kittenish" (*JP*: 49). In this instant of self-perception, Prudence seems both sexualised and infantilised, simultaneously subject and not-yet-subject to her desires.

There is a similar scene involving Wilmet which, though not a depiction of a woman eating alone, is germane to the examination of abjection of the nutritive and the sexual. In this instance, Wilmet and Harry (her best friend's husband) meet for a "tête-à-tête luncheon at a masculine sort of restaurant, famed for its meat, where great joints are wheeled up to the table for one's choice and approval" (*GB*: 87).⁷²

This ritual seemed to take the place of the ordeal by fire which the more foreign restaurants went in for, where every dish apparently had to submit itself to being heated up in the leaping flames while the patrons looked nervously on. When the joint came to us I found myself turning aside with a kind of womanly delicacy, hardly able to look at it in the face, for there was something almost indecent about the sight of meat in such abundance. All the same it was very splendid beef and I found myself eating it with enjoyment, even relish.

Here, Wilmet replaces the absent referent -- the meat has a 'face', as though it is the undressed corpse of a cow that has been brought to the table -- and thus centres an abject image of blood and death. It is jarring, then, when this profanity prefaces the insertion of desire. Harry's sexual intention, already overtly expressed (he declares, "I should like us to have fun together" [*GB*: 88]), is amplified by the abundance of meat. Wilmet, consciously adopting a gender-based language of food⁷³, initially responds

⁷² As it happens, the restaurant is Simpsons -- the one Mrs Grandison fantasises about before Lady Selvedge takes her to the cheap help-yourself café in *An Unsuitable Attachment*. Pym's diaries record that she dined there with a woman friend on 7 October 1955 and was struck by the abundance of meat: "Lunch with Barbara Evans at Simpsons -- gorgeous roast beef. When eating meat -- and here a woman is given as much as a man [sic]", MS PYM 47, folio 3 verso.

⁷³ She views the restaurant as 'masculine' and her response to the meat is one of 'womanly' delicacy. In "Spinster's Fare", Schofield talks briefly of the gender-based language of food, citing Nancy K. Miller's theory of the 'posture of imposture', 62.

abjectly to the meat and to Harry's overtures before effecting sublimation through laughter. In the end, however, she finds pleasure in both the meat and in the flirtation:

Then I suddenly thought -- why, it's only old Harry Grinners, whom you've known for ten years, no need to treat him with such chilly detachment! 'Endless good lunches with lots of lovely meat?' I said more gaily. 'Is that the idea?'

'Darling, you will have your joke -- that's the surprising and tantalizing thing about you'. (GB: 88)

Perhaps because Wilmet has prior knowledge of Harry's feelings for her, though she cannot reciprocate them, and revels in her powers of attraction, she is better able to cope with overt signs of male desire. Other Pym heroines, however, are uneasy by their own desire and flustered by the evidence of the desire of others, uncertain how to govern their response. Through 'love-displacement', fearsome and monstrous emotions are quashed by preoccupation with the safe and familiar. Emma displaces frightening emotions when poring over a magazine advice page, reading about sexual difficulties and wondering if she could write about her own problems with Graham. She turns to the cookery pages instead, where "[t]he brightly coloured illustrations [give] other kinds of food for thought" (FGL: 184), less frightening than those linked to the complexities of sexual entanglement. Mildred is another who uses food as sexual diversion. In a humorous scene in the manuscript version of *Excellent Women*, Rocky visits Mildred in search of consolation after Helena leaves him. Though her 'summer' undergarments are hanging to dry in the kitchen, Mildred determines that coyness and embarrassment are inappropriate in light of Rocky's crisis. He, however, plays the part of the distraught husband very poorly, reciting some provocative lines of verse from Andrew Marvell's "The Garden",

'The nectarine and the curious peach
Into my hands themselves do reach'

while "absently pulling down a garment. 'I'll get you something to eat', [Mildred says]. 'You must be hungry'.⁷⁴ Here, there is no mistaking the erotic symbolism of fruit.⁷⁵ (This scene recalls another, when Prudence consoles herself with plans to consume a "really ripe, yellow-fleshed peach" [*JP*: 225], perhaps an allusion to her own attributes which Fabian would not now come to enjoy.) But Mildred moves swiftly to channel Rocky's desire. Focusing his attention on 'real' food, she breaks the tableau, though she unconsciously effects the consummation of a metaphorical sexual transaction by quelling his aroused hunger with the provision of food.

For Mildred and other restrained heroines, keeping fearsome and monstrous emotions in check is paramount. As Kristeva says, the abject "disturbs identity, system, order. [It] does not respect borders, positions, rules". Sublimation, however, controls it and laughter displaces it⁷⁶, and thus the Pymian heroine, armed with the skills of ironic detachment, protects the integrity of her 'self'. Those female characters who lack control appear fearsome or monstrous themselves, and often these traits are figured through the trope of greed. Maggie Lane posits that "[t]o take an interest in food in a Jane Austen novel is to be almost certainly condemned as frivolous, selfish or gross"⁷⁷, but Pym's novels are different. Here a well-modulated interest in food

⁷⁴ MS PYM 13, folio 16 verso. The published version reads: "Rocky followed me into my kitchen and stood under the line of washing, which I noticed with irritation had become too dry to be ironed comfortably. He began pulling down the garments and making jokes about them, but I felt that this was not the time for coyness or embarrassment, so I took no notice of him" (*EW*: 144).

⁷⁵ Maggie Lane corroborates this notion that "fruit is a potent symbol of sexual attraction and love", 147.

⁷⁶ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4, 8.

⁷⁷ Lane, 78.

informs a moral life. An undue interest in food, however, especially in meat, leads to the forfeiture of heroic sympathies and bears comic results. Old Mrs Beamish, for example, "seems to *need* meat", leading Wilmet to picture her as an animal, "crouching greedily over a great steak or taking up a chop bone in her fingers, all to give her strength to batten on her daughter with her tiresome demands" (GB: 21-2). Ianthe's Aunt Bertha must also have meat on 'doctor's orders', being forbidden to fast or keep the days of abstinence during Lent: "he said to me [...] 'You must have a full meal *with meat*'" (UA: 91-2). Clearly, Ianthe feels uncomfortable with this fierce testimonial, responding: "I don't think it does anyone any harm to fast a little", but adding hastily, "if one is in good health" (UA: 92). And when Mark and Digby take Esther and Gertrude to lunch, the young men worry about having enough money to feed the women's profane appetites: "They looked like the kind of women who would eat red meat, [Digby thinks] resentfully" (LA: 96).⁷⁸ In the Pymian scene of eating, approbation hinges on a character's ability to locate pleasure in restraint. Recalling the archaic tradition of the 'old maid' -- a woman who eats the last piece of meat on her plate, "remaining as single as that last piece"⁷⁹, it seems the greedy Pym woman's excessive regard for food precludes her from becoming the object of another's love.

⁷⁸ Earlier in the novel, Esther admits: "We live out of tins and on frozen stuff [...] And we always choose the kind of meat you can fry -- chops and things like that" (LA: 16). In the restaurant scene, Mark and Digby choose very inexpensive items from the menu in order to be able to pay for the women's more expensive choices. In order to explain his abstemiousness, Mark lies and says he does not eat meat or fish, leading Gertrude to ask if he is vegetarian: "I have great sympathy with those who are, though I am not one myself" (LA: 96).

⁷⁹ Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner*, 284-5.

A total renunciation of food represents the other extreme, where the symptom of the abject becomes all-encompassing and the control mechanism of sublimation fails. There is only one character in Pym's canon, Marcia Ivory, who manifest this pathology, but as her story is so dramatic it bears some scrutiny.⁸⁰ From the outset of the novel, Marcia's eccentric behaviour is marked through a compulsive habit of collecting tinned food, among other things. Her eccentricities are exacerbated by retirement when -- never having had a big appetite (the novel echoes with this phrase) -- she begins to starve herself to death. One day she consumes half a piece of bread with "greenish mould fringing the crust" (*QA*: 92) and another day has a couple of digestive biscuits, lacking the strength to open a tin of luncheon meat (*QA*: 129).⁸¹ Though Norman warns her about the dangers of anorexia nervosa, Marcia explains (wrongly, it turns out) that it was 'young girls' who suffered this, reminding him again, "I've never been a big eater" (*QA*: 108). Anorexia, Mervyn Nicholson theorises, "withdraws one from the drive to eat/destroy life" as it is manifest in an "unconscious fear of 'oral impregnation' [...] -- i.e. fear of participation in the lifecycle".⁸² The end result of this fear is uncontrolled abjection expressed through unchecked food loathing -- a body's most extreme effort to correct a disturbance in identity, system,

⁸⁰ There are other instances in the novels of 'disordered' eating, all figured comically. Penelope Grandison, for example, overeats at a dinner party and splits the back of her too-tight dress (*UA*: 128) and eats depressively when a romantic attachment does not develop in the way she hoped: "In her disappointment and misery Penelope flung herself on the divan among the rose-coloured velvet cushions and lay sulkily eating a Mars bar she had happened to find conveniently to hand among the jumble of things on her bedside table" (*UA*: 207).

⁸¹ In a working notebook entry, Pym records: "There could be talk in the office about elderly people being found dead with no food in the home. 'One might have a tin of soup but lack the strength to open it'", MS PYM 71, folio 5 verso.

⁸² Nicholson, 196.

order. According to Patricia Naulty, Marcia's self-starvation constitutes a response to "the meagreness of the portion given her during her years of employment and the reduction of that portion following her retirement".⁸³ Her eating disorder figures as "a language of protest and rejection"⁸⁴; her body becomes the site of a mute expression of rage against victimisation, powerlessness, and loss of control.

As an illustration of a lone woman consumer permeated by the abject, Marcia is exceptional. Normally, Pym's treatment of the solitary scene of eating and her presentation of the abject are framed with characteristically gentle mocking humour. We see this, for example, when Dulcie, who wonders at one point if she is perhaps obsessed with the idea of hot drinks (*NFRL*: 111), finds comfort in the notion that soon she, Laurel, and Viola "would all be making their little separate drinks" (*NFRL*: 75). Dulcie's aspirations reflect a theme that is central to Pym's narrative structure: that we live 'alone together', living and working in close proximity yet occupying our own little 'universes'. When Caroline Grimstone attends a party and notices "Dr. Cranton, the head librarian, discoursing to a small captive circle [while] his wife quietly ate in a corner" (*AQ*: 8), this scene highlights how food provides comfort in an impersonal world. But even the pleasure found in a solitary meal relies on a system of checks and balances, as Mildred realises: "I found it rather a bother cooking just for myself [...] I thought of my half-used tin of baked beans; no doubt I should be seeing that again tomorrow" (*EW*: 32).⁸⁵ So by placing themselves outside meaningful

⁸³ Patricia Naulty, *'I Never Talk of Hunger': Self-starvation as Women's Language of Protest in Novels by Barbara Pym, Margaret Atwood, and Anne Tyler* (unpublished PhD thesis, Ohio State University, 1988), 26.

⁸⁴ Naulty, 3.

transactions, by observing rather than participating, Pym's heroines effectively remove themselves from a social economy based on the recognition of the mutuality of needs and desires. And, by absenting the self from the other's desire, they risk stifling their own. However, as discussed in the next chapter, those heroines who prepare and serve food to others (especially to men, the enigmatic Pymian 'Other') not only avoid the abject reality of leftovers, but locate a different sort of pleasure that comes through straying onto excluded ground.

⁸⁵ Pym's working notebook version figures the abject even more blatantly: "A revolting thing in the oven for one person -- beans, potatoes etc. Always some left over", MS PYM 40, folio 3 recto.

Chapter 4: 'Like a lion above the bird': Meeting the Needs of Pym's Men

Serving oneself is an inherently anti-social act, one whose rules operate distinctly from those of conventional hierarchies, of inclusion and exclusion, of undertaking relational transactions. It is clear that within the Pymian scene of eating, many of her women find a degree of pleasure in the exclusionary act of eating alone, and by its very exclusivity, solitary eating can promote feelings of empowerment. But these are often achieved at the expense of investing in normative relationships with others, investment that involves mutual emotional risk-taking. Serving food to another, however, requires not just an awareness of the sanctity of social and physical boundaries and a sensitivity to the way in which these can be crossed in socially-approved ways, but a willingness to speculate within a socio-sexual economy based on a mutuality of needs and desires. For those Pymian heroines who serve food to others, particularly to men, crossing the boundaries separating the sexes can be a frightening prospect, but it is one that offers, in its most conventional manifestation, pleasure in fulfilment of gender roles, and in its most thrilling, pleasure that is gained through communion, unification, and identification with another, especially the 'Other'.

Since a prime cultural directive of femininity is to serve others, at first glance it would appear that Pym's women who cook and serve food undertake admirably the traditional duties meted out by gender roles. Closer inspection reveals, however, that in serving men, these women engage in a higher design. Because female appetite is figured as feminine desire within the novels, it follows that some of Pym's women are

portrayed as predators; as Robert Liddell states, "[i]t is rare that Pym's women are the object of pursuit, nearly every one of them is a huntress -- but one feels that they hunt for sport (so to speak) not for food".¹ So in cooking and serving food to men -- in fattening them up for 'consumption' -- Pym's women heartily subscribe to the aphorism that says 'the way to a man's heart is through his stomach'. Pym turns the phrase on its head, however, by transforming the 'consumers' into the 'consumed', and plays with the sexual metaphor of food through cultural inversion, so that men figure as women's meat. Pym's men themselves are a meagre lot, leading Robert Emmet Long to state that it appeared as though "a plague had taken all of England's hardier men, leaving only vicars and care-worn anthropologists as matrimonial prospects".² These men, even the most suitable among them, consistently fail to challenge Pym's women in any meaningful or satisfying way, thus inserting another obstacle within the traditional script of heterosexual romance. Consonantly, a Pymian socio-sexual economy requires more investment from its women in order to sustain it, thus proving that it operates in just the way Jane suggests: "it was [women's] love and imagination that transformed these unremarkable beings" (*JP*: 247). Pym ironises, then, through an essentially negative view of men, not only the myths of male privilege that characterise gender hierarchy, but the behaviour of those women (not her enlightened heroines) who perpetuate these myths (that 'a man needs meat'), leaving these women to compete with each other in an effort to provide for, and capture, these handsome but ultimately undesirable men.

¹ Liddell, *A Mind at Ease*, 31.

² Long, 209.

Generally, Pym's men adhere to three principal character patterns. Two of these types, the hunter-man and the child-man, manifest certain traits associated with conventional masculine behaviour, and reveal subtle but detectable differences in their relationships with Pym's women. The hunter-man represents what Robert Bly calls "[t]he dark side of men", evidenced by his exploitation of resources and women, and a bent for tribal warfare.³ In Pym's novels he figures as a sort of 'lady-killer' who is attractive, charming, and ostensibly commanding. Fabian, for example, bears the classic hunter character-profile, leonine in appearance and with a reputation for having engaged in numerous infidelities when his wife was alive. But he ends up falling victim to Jessie ("Life with [her] suddenly seemed a frightening prospect [...] It was as if a net had closed round him" [*JP*: 226]), proving how it is often the case that the hunter turns into the hunted and finds himself the object of another's consumption. Furthermore, predatory women serve food, like bait, to hunter-men, with the purpose of entrapment. In this way, Jessie indulges Fabian's baser needs -- possibly through the provision of sex, by "[stooping] to ways Miss Bates wouldn't have dreamed of", as Mrs Arkwright suggests (*JP*: 238) -- as well as in satisfying his vulgar taste for fish tea (*JP*: 200), revealing a "devotion" in serving him that, as Jessie herself points out insightfully, "is worse than blackmail -- a man has no escape from that" (*JP*: 143).

The child-man represents another conventional pattern of masculine behaviour, conforming to Bly's notion of the "phenomenon of the 'eternal boy'", a stance sometimes characterised as a revolt against the maternal, or even the paternal.⁴

³ Robert Bly, *Iron John* (Longmead, Shaftesbury, Dorset: Element, 1993), x.

⁴ Bly, 100.

According to Freud, "[a] child's first erotic object is the mother's breast that nourishes it; love has its origin in attachment to the satisfied need for nourishment".⁵ In relation to desire and its fulfilment, a child's psychical energies centre on mental satisfaction as opposed to physical need; fulfilment of the first automatically leads to fulfilment of the latter. It is this relationship between infant and mother, what Juliet Mitchell terms the infant-mother nexus, that provides the paradigm for Freud's theory of the pleasure principle. Mitchell explains, citing how

[t]he infant [...] lives almost entirely within the terms of the satisfaction, or otherwise of its needs. If its wishes are unsatisfied it expresses unpleasure and then hallucinates the satisfaction it has been denied (as in later life, we fulfil our wishes in dreams). But repeated non-satisfaction leads to the abandonment of hallucination and the registration of what is real -- in this case real deprivation. This is the introduction of the reality principle.⁶

Pym's women take advantage of these psychological premises in an effort to control the child-man through the management of his dietary agenda. Nicholas Cleveland, for example, manifests symptoms of the child-man pattern beyond the revelations of his tastes, evidenced by his fascination for soap animals. Nicholas buys himself miniature soaps in the shape of animals -- "Kiddisoaps, for children, really", he admits, leading Jane to ask herself, "If it is true that men only want one thing [...] is it perhaps just to be left to themselves with their soap animals or some other harmless little trifle?" (*JP*: 146). Jane's speculation on Nicholas' philosophy of desire comes closest to exposing the myth of men's needs, ultimately represented by Miss Doggett when she declares mysteriously that "men only want *one thing*" (*JP*: 79). But Jane understands the prosaic realities of male desire because marriage to a child-man has turned her into a

⁵ Sigmund Freud, *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1972 [1940]), 45.

⁶ Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 13.

quasi-'nursery nanny', giving her control over his bodily functions, allowing her to pronounce with authority on Nicholas' likes and dislikes: "my husband can't take toad" (JP: 54).

The third type of Pym man, the 'queer'⁷, does not benefit from having his needs addressed by Pym's women. Instead, this man serves a narrative function of his own, demonstrated in two ways: he provides social commentary, usually a defence of bourgeois patriarchal cultural values, and he situates himself as a rival in the competition to serve other men. Wilf Bason, a shameless self-promoter and moderate misogynist, exhibits these proclivities for social commentary and competition, remarking on Father Bode's common tastes and Father Thames' refined ones, while denigrating the tastes of women in general: "I feel that women don't really understand the finer points of cooking or appreciate rare things" (GB: 57). Wilf considers himself an artist ("what poetry there *is* in cooking!" [GB: 138]), upholding Robert Graham's theory which alleges that, "[d]emonstrably, the most imaginative and creative men in Pym's fiction -- as well as the most interesting intellectually -- are homosexuals".⁸ This point can only highlight the inadequacies of the other men in the novels, those who remain within the pool drawn upon by Pym's women in the search for suitable men. It is significant that some men in the novels with homosexual traits can appear

⁷ Pym herself used the phrase 'queer' as a reference with some denigratory bias. In an upper margin of the typescript manuscript of *Excellent Women*, for example, she asks about the character William Bodicote (changed to Caldicote in the published version) "Is he a Q. perhaps?" (MS PYM 13, folio 7 recto). The use of the term 'queer' in this chapter recognises Pym's use of it while acknowledging its current significance as a term of reclamation.

⁸ Graham, 146.

more desirable, within the context of a romantic paradigm, than the heterosexual men with whom the women are expected to form meaningful relationships. Others of the 'queer' type -- and Wilf is a classic example -- bear no conventional romantic qualities whatsoever, but their efforts in serving men emphasise, as do women's efforts, the folly in expending physical and emotional energy in embarking upon lives spent in servitude to unworthy hero figures.

Pym's men may indeed show signs of weakness, a sort of gender-specific *malaise* characterised through ineffectuality, immaturity, or effeminacy, and yet they maintain their positions of cultural authority. They may be morally weak but they are nevertheless empowered, unthreatened, and entrenched. Pym's women, on the other hand, despite exercising a *form* of power through influence and control -- evidenced, say, in their role as servers and withholders of food -- actually operate within a limited reality of control.⁹ The Pymian heroine understands this, using her knowledge and insight to help construct a detached outlook, even as she accepts the inviolability of rules of hierarchy. A meal of meat offers an ideal metaphor through which to figure this sexual power differential. As Margaret Visser explains,

[s]haring meat *can* be made into an expression of egalitarian ideals -- but only if the flesh is reduced to small fragments, as relish, soup, or stew to be eaten with vegetables, as pie filling and stuffing, or as minced and re-formed meat cakes.¹⁰

This egalitarianism corresponds to the Pymian women's scene of eating where rules of hierarchy are deferred in order to facilitate eating away from the ambivalent animal

⁹ McIntosh and Zey write, "The concepts of power, influence, and control are essential to our understanding of the concept of women's domestic role, especially its food-related responsibilities and its relationship to the exercise of power in the home", 322.

¹⁰ Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner*, 231-2; the following quote also from this page.

power. But, as Visser also acknowledges, centring the animal power affirms rules of hierarchy and thus corresponds to the Pymian men's scene of eating:

A whole beast cut up in public [...] expresses the unity of the group that consumes it; but if the pieces offered retain their character and everyone gets something different, then meat division can dramatize at the same time the individuality and the ranking of everybody at dinner.

In this way, the Pym man truly does resemble a "lion above the bird" (as Fabian is described [*JP*: 21]), for not only is he represented by a powerful image of authority but his ranking is also indexed to meat division -- served by the female of the species.

'Playing the most womanly part of all': Pym's Women Serve the 'Other'

In the Pymian context, the phrase 'a man needs meat' is one that features two absent referents: the animal from which the meat is derived and the woman who prepares the meat. Indeed, for man to receive meat, or any other food in Pym's novels, it must be prepared for him. Traditionally, women have always been preparers and servers of food, and the process of serving corresponds to conventional notions of the role of the feminine; it is only a stock male character, an effeminised one, who can cook for himself and others. Sociologists have observed that

[b]ecause a good deal of [food] consumption occurs in the home, it has been assumed to be the province of women. Women are credited with control over the purchasing, storing, cooking, and serving of food.¹¹

Furthermore, in undertaking this task, "[w]omen have learned the importance of consumption opportunities they provide in terms of survival value, moral worth, and self-fulfillment".¹² Certainly the women in Pym's novels recognise the value of the consumption opportunities they provide men: "You lucky men, lying in bed while we

¹¹ McIntosh and Zey, 318.

¹² McIntosh and Zey, 317.

women wait on you", Miss Randall declares, having brought Aylwin an early morning cup of tea (*NFRL*: 24). It is in ensuring the survival and the moral well-being of their charges that it is thought these women derive pleasure and feelings of self-fulfilment.

Within Pymian 'tribal customs', though, even more opportunities arise through the serving of food. The ritual of serving accords with archaic notions of relational reciprocity: one serves in order to be served something in return, even if it is only to receive another's company. In some cases in the novels, the ritual functions as a metaphor for sexual transaction, reflecting an economy based on food for sex. And finally, the ritual can be grounded in competition, where the desire to gain self-fulfilment through the serving of food leads to rivalries among women who serve. These predatory women, the 'gatekeepers of consumption', try to outdo each other (in the novels women who work as cooks are said to 'do for' men) in a bid to feed the small herd of suitable men who populate the novels. Literally 'feeding off' feeding others, these avid servers are viewed by Pym's heroines with a certain degree of ironic detachment, arising from the recognition that a vocation to serve can be both culturally and socially confining. Such constrictions result in a 'loss of sex', and hence a loss of identity, where servers forfeit subjective agency in an all-consuming drive to anticipate and meet the needs of others. Dulcie seems to realise this, even if she does not care to consider its implications for herself, when she says, "I shall hardly be a woman at all, flitting backwards and forwards between the kitchen and the dining-room -- looking to see if people have what they want, and all that sort of thing" (*NFRL*: 117). Though Viola reassures her, "You will be playing the most

womanly part of all", this observation exposes the limitations of the feminine as cultural functionary compared to the possibilities inherent in gender as a component of self-determined identity.

Before discussing issues relating to gender limitations inherent in the act of serving food, it is important to consider the opportunities presented in serving others. Just eating daily with others is an indication of some form of kinship; the act of regularly sharing food fosters kinship ties, strengthens bonds, and reconfirms the mutuality of relationships. Within the context of familial communities, where kin eat together, women traditionally cook daily for others and this arrangement is meant to reflect an economy of mutual benefit as well.¹³ Margaret Visser records, for example, that in African tradition (citing anthropologist L-V Thomas), "[m]arriage means, for a man, being cooked for by a woman, and for a woman, feeding a man: eating together and sleeping together are two sides of the same coin".¹⁴ This observation recalls a similar one made by Mark, representing a Pymian anthropologist's assessment of the nature of a sexual relationship: "It would be a reciprocal relationship -- the woman giving the food and shelter and doing some typing for him and the man giving the priceless gift of himself" (*LA*: 72). Mark's comment, delivered with the earnest seriousness of the slightly drunk, cannot be taken entirely seriously, and yet it provides unguarded insight into the Pymian male view of feminine utility, echoing

¹³ Women do, however, prepare food for others and yet never eat with them, perhaps due to a lack of kinship or to barriers represented by a power differential. This is the case with Miss Prior, the Bede sisters' seamstress: "She could never have her meals with Emily [the cook] in the kitchen, nor would she presume to take them with Belinda and Harriet. They must be taken in to her on a tray" (*STG*: 44).

¹⁴ Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner*, 80.

Digby in his appraisal of Catherine's worth: "A woman who can cook *and* type -- what more could a man want, really?" (*LA*: 72).

There is an instance in the novels where a woman who prepares food for a man clearly does not feel that the relationship is a reciprocal one. Daphne Dagnall lives with and keeps house for her brother, Tom, the rector in a village parish. At the outset of the novel she articulates her depression and dreams of escape to the Aegean. Indeed, Daphne signals her obsession with the romance and mystique of Greece in nearly everything she cooks. The ploughman's lunch Tom imagines she will prepare for him is a 'Greek version' -- "a hunk of stale bread, a few small hard black olives, the larger juicier kind being unobtainable here, and something approaching a goats'-milk cheese" (*FGL*: 31-2), while Emma assumes that "[t]he shepherd's pie, concocted from the remains of the Sunday joint, would turn up as a kind of moussaka at the rectory [...] given Daphne's passionate interest in Greece" (*FGL*: 14). When Daphne finally decides to tell Tom that she is leaving him, she makes a pastry:

She had just put a gooseberry tart into the oven and was wondering what to do with the bit of pastry left over, forming it into various shapes, flowers or animals and then -- significantly -- miniature human figures that reminded her of the little Cycladic idols she had seen in the museum in Athens (*FGL*: 122)

Predictably, Tom's response to her news mirrors his self-interest, angering Daphne, who, in a symbolic gesture, "slapped the lump of pastry together, Cycladic idols and all [...] All these years wasted", she thinks, "making a home for somebody who hardly even noticed that she was there!" (*FGL*: 124). Daphne's lack of fulfilment is poignantly articulated through the trope of food. The Greek food, including the little Cycladic idols, signals her desire to be elsewhere. Violently slapping together the

pastry idols speaks of her immediate anger and, perhaps, of frustration with her own untapped physical and emotional potential. Even the gooseberry tart -- she 'plays gooseberry' to Tom's fascination with other interests -- may symbolise the resentment she feels in being placed outside his life. Most significantly, Daphne has been compelled to assume a role as Tom's wife without reaping any of the benefits that being a wife should bring, leaving her feeling under-appreciated and ill-used. She has come to want more for her efforts.

According to social anthropologists, it is the case that, as Margaret Visser puts it, "[t]he woman offers cooking in exchange for sex [and] the man offers sex in exchange for cooking. It follows that women 'receive' sex as men 'are fed' food".¹⁵ Of course, being Tom's sister, Daphne cannot expect him to provide sex in exchange for her efforts in cooking, but she does miss a sort of emotional fidelity from him. In a series of scenes in *Excellent Women*, however, cooking and sex are clearly conjoined. Here, Pym plays with sexual humour while foregrounding the romantic suitability of a particular man, figured through the image of a woman cooking his meat. Everard Bone, whose name has not only an anthropological ring to it but also a vaguely sexual one, phones up Mildred and invites her to dine at his house, having a joint of meat to hand (this being the early 1950s, meat is still rationed and hard to procure). Assuming that Everard is incapable of cooking the meat himself and not being desirous to do it

¹⁵ Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner*, 273. Visser notes: "Eating can be spoken of as synonymous with the sex act itself. In the languages of the Ghanaian LaDogaa and Gonja, the verb 'to eat' is frequently used for sex, covering a semantic field very similar to that of the English word 'enjoy'".

for him, Mildred declines. However, her conscience immediately begins to prey upon her, and she worries about how Everard will cope with the meat on his own:

I had not wanted to see Everard Bone and the idea of having to cook his evening meal for him was more than I could bear at this moment. And yet the thought of him alone with his meat was unbearable too. He would turn to the section on meat. He would read that beef or mutton should be cooked for so many minutes per pound and so many over. He would weigh the little joint, if he had scales. He would then puzzle over the heat of the oven, turning it on and standing over it watching the thermometer go up... (*EW*: 203)

Given Pym's facility with covert phallic humour, the sexual symbolism resident in the phrase 'cook his meat' is readily accessible, pointing toward the romantic possibilities awaiting Mildred and Everard -- if she relents and accepts his offer of meat. (The image Mildred conjures of Everard cooking his meat himself is equally suggestive, though, straying onto the excluded ground of a masturbatory fantasy.) Mildred's guilt continues to prey upon her so that days later, she thinks of him -- "Everard Bone and his meat" (*EW*: 208) and, later still, of how she "had refused to cook it for him" (*EW*: 210). But eventually Mildred accepts Everard's offer of a meal only to discover that he has a woman who 'does' for him, and she has put a bird in the oven for their dinner. So while Mildred manages to defer for the moment the act of cooking his meat for him, Everard convinces her that she could do some typing and indexing. The novel ends with Mildred revising her views of the rewards of servitude:

before long I should be certain to find myself at his sink, peeling potatoes and washing up; that would be a nice change when both proof-reading and indexing began to pall. Was any man worth this burden? Probably not [...] (*EW*: 237)

Emma is another heroine who cooks for and serves food to men, though she actually receives sex in return. However, she seems no more pleased and just as confused by the supposed reciprocity of this relationship as Daphne is with hers.

When carrying food through the woods to Graham one day, Emma thinks that "[s]ometimes he would have to be content with her company only, her conversation, and whatever else he might be prepared to ask and she to give" (*FGL*: 133). This is a mistake, of course, for Graham is prepared to ask for anything and give nothing. His view of Emma is unabashedly mercenary and he gladly accepts her food and even the use of her body while betraying a disinterest in establishing a deeper connection with her. In the end he returns to his estranged wife, Claudia, leaving Emma to return to preparing lone meals until she starts cooking for Tom, recently abandoned by *his* meal-provider, Daphne. Tom, perhaps having learned a lesson from Daphne's departure, is very accepting of Emma's cooking, appreciating the fact that "she hadn't made any special effort with the meal" provided him (*FGL*: 173). The novel concludes with the possibility of romance blooming between Emma and Tom, partly realised on his need to be looked after and partly on her recognition that she could elicit his approval by making no more effort for him than she would for herself.

Emma's habit of walking through the woods to bring food to Graham suggests an image of pagan ritual, where a prestigious man (or an idol) attracts female pilgrims bearing gifts of food. It also recalls a tribal arrangement where, as in some African cultures, a man of status who has many wives receives a dish of food from each one. Visser notes that "how much he eats is an important index of his sentiments about the provider, and of his opinion of her prowess in that essential female skill, cooking".¹⁶ In Pym's novels, the various gifts of food that a man sometimes receives, and the fact

¹⁶ Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner*, 81-2.

that other women manifest signs of jealousy upon hearing that he is being plied with food in this way, suggests the re-creation of tribal rivalries, where various 'wives' compete for a man's favour. For example, Rupert Stonebird receives a gift of an oxtail ("To eat", he assures Penelope, "it was in a basin" [UA: 84]) from a woman, causing Penelope to respond with an uncharacteristic "mix of scorn and jealousy". She determines that her approach to seducing an unwitting Rupert is to "be subtler than that [...] -- just bringing food won't be enough" (UA: 86), though perhaps she feels at a slight disadvantage in terms of competition, given her limited culinary skills.

It is not uncommon for the numerous Pym women to compete with each other for the few suitable men, using the opportunity to serve food as a means of pressing their advantage. Like Penelope, Jessie is unable to compete as a cook, so she takes Fabian out to indulge his vulgar taste for fish suppers. Leonora tempts James with a variety of extravagant meals and delicacies -- "prawns and lobster, asparagus tips, white peaches" (SDD: 151) -- making it virtually impossible for Phoebe to compete. While Leonora always has a "delicious 'little something', always ready or made in a moment", Phoebe is "obviously not at her best in the kitchen":

James noticed a cold joint standing on the table by the open window, very much exposed to wandering animals, and he had seen a cat prowling around outside. There was also a bowl of lettuce from which he surreptitiously removed a few inedible-looking leaves which seemed to have earth adhering to them [...] James began to feel that he was not so hungry after all. (SDD: 58)

Mildred, too, is able to prepare a simple yet delicious meal on short notice, thereby gaining Rocky's approbation: "I washed a lettuce and dressed it with a little of my carefully hoarded olive oil and some salt. I also had a Camembert cheese, a fresh loaf and a bowl of greengages for dessert [...] Rocky began to eat with a show of appetite"

(EW: 144-5). Though Mildred recognises at this point in the novel that she cannot read too much meaning into the poses that Rocky affects so easily, she does view Helena as competition. When Rocky complains that Helena "couldn't even wash a lettuce properly [...] let alone prepare a salad like this" (EW: 145), Mildred silently extracts a measure of *jouissance* from the knowledge that her culinary skills are superior. The sense of achievement is trivial, perhaps, but significant nonetheless. Belinda feels it, too, upon learning that the food she serves is better, in terms of quantity and quality, than her rival's:

Belinda's eyes filled with tears and she experienced one of those sudden moments of joy that sometimes come to us in the middle of an ordinary day. Her heart was like a singing bird, and all because Agatha didn't keep as good a table as she did [...] (STG: 50)

As Barbara Brothers suggests, Pym's heroines' insight exposes a disjuncture between desire and fulfilment.¹⁷ Mildred's and Belinda's experiences signal their recognition that having a man's respect and esteem is sometimes preferable to having a man.

For some of Pym's more predatory women, however, the gap between desire and fulfilment is a small one. The compulsion to hunt a man down and catch him overrides any understanding of a certain reality: successful capture of a Pym man brings a dubious reward. Jessie's hunt for Fabian is perhaps the most notorious campaign in the canon. Though she seems fully aware of his many shortcomings, Jessie pursues Fabian relentlessly and traps him into agreeing to marry her. The way in which he phrases their intention betrays a lack of volition: "Yes, we are to be married [...] It seems to have come to that" (JP: 213). And in a different way,

¹⁷ Brothers, "Love, Marriage, and Manners in the Novels of Barbara Pym", 160.

Leonora is as predatory as Jessie -- indeed, *The Sweet Dove Died* foregrounds these themes of entrapment and captivity -- and she uses food most effectively to achieve her ends. When Leonora successfully manoeuvres James into the upstairs flat, having evicted the elderly tenant, she says, "I thought perhaps a cold meal, but I've made one of *my* soups" (*SDD*: 118). James' oppression, symbolised by the bars on the windows of the new flat, is compounded by Leonora's control of his diet. On a later occasion when he is ill in bed, James feels overcome by a sense of hopelessness, figured again through the metaphor of captivity and the trope of food: "He would never find a flat of his own. There was no escape from anything, ever. Now she was urging him to eat a few grapes" (*SDD*: 135). As the predatory woman's own appetite for food can metonymically figure her own desire, her appetite for men re-figures the 'mantra of male needs', so that men become her meat; she feeds them in order to 'fatten' them up for later consumption.

Many Pym women manifest this predatory drive in a slightly different way. Not exactly 'huntresses' like Jessie and Leonora, these other women are guardians, 'gatekeepers of consumption' who maintain social and cultural order by controlling and influencing men's diets. Their abiding interest in the needs of men, which echoes throughout *Jane and Prudence* in particular, signals a belief in the sanctity of the male appetite and an allegiance to patriarchal cultural values. Here, it is decreed that a man needs meat, eggs, bird, a cooked breakfast, and a lot of food at all times. The Misses Doggett, Crampton, Mayhew, Glaze, and Arkwright all conform to a gatekeeper profile, abnegating their own desires in overseeing the fulfilment of the desires of

others. When Jane witnesses a scene where the various women importune Edward Lyall, the image seems a familiar one: "The hall, the trestle tables, the good-looking young man, the ladies surrounding him ... where had she seen all this before? Then it came to her. It was usually curates who were accorded such treatment" (*JP*: 100). Certainly in Pym's novels, the clergy are prone to predation by women as evidenced by Miss Spicer's 'attack' on Neville Forbes: "she said she loved him -- waylaid him one night after Benediction" (*NFRL*: 149). And yet, as Merritt Moseley observes, clergymen are also "members of the most coddled and excused class of men"¹⁸ and their dietary requirements are of primary concern to the gatekeepers of consumption. The care and feeding of clergy adheres to timeless ritual, as Rhoda and Mabel Swan attest, for these two guardians of patriarchal foodways have "the rather old-fashioned idea that the presence of a clergyman at their table called for a bird of some kind" (*LA*: 141), though Deirdre becomes exasperated with their mindless determination. Indeed, such blind faith in observing the rules of satisfying men's dietary needs does present an opportunity for ironic reflection, where gender role seems limited to that of cultural functionary and gender relations trivialised as a business of catering.

It is significant that many of the food observances Rhoda and Mabel keep resonate with an archaic logic, harking back to times when there was little ambiguity attached to gender roles and expectations. Mabel, for example, "[has] never got over an old-fashioned dislike of eating raw green leaves. When her husband had been alive they had always had a hot meal in the evenings, winter and summer alike" (*LA*: 34).

¹⁸ Moseley, 82.

And Rhoda feels strongly that "the men must be fed" in the aftermath of the news of Tom's death in Africa, even though none of the women feels hungry; she "[holds] on to the idea [of feeding the men] as something stable and comforting" (*LA*: 232). The pleasure these gatekeepers of consumption derive from undertaking these actions is unmistakable, and yet their efforts to serve others, especially men, speaks less of communion than it does of deferral. Their obsession with the needs of the 'Other' highlights an unwillingness or inability to explore their own fantasies and fears, to confront their most intimate and serious apocalypses, and in so doing, identify these emotions in others. They become subsumed within their role as servers. In a most extreme example, Edwin's wife, in *Quartet in Autumn*, was found "unconscious in the kitchen, about to put a shepherd's pie in the oven" (*QA*: 134), a martyr to the server's cause. Part of the difficulty may be attributed to the gatekeeper's apparent lack of imagination; she is too entrenched in her role as a server to men to know how to effect communion with them. The other part of the difficulty lies with Pym's men, who expect women to do everything for them while offering very little in return. As an ever-introspective Jane observes,

Oh, but it was splendid the things women were doing for men all the time [...] Making them feel, perhaps sometimes by no more than a casual glance, that they were loved and admired and desired when they were worthy of none of these things (*JP*: 84)

'Some of my best friends are men': Pym and Misandry

Hazel Holt alleges that "[t]here is no doubt that [Pym] thought women the stronger sex".¹⁹ An entry from Pym's working notebook of 1954 seems to support this claim,

¹⁹ Halperin, 89

as she concluded, after dining with a male friend she had not seen for twenty years, that "[w]ith the years men get more bumbling and vague, but women get sharper".²⁰ Pym's ambivalent feelings for the opposite sex were partly experientially derived, no doubt engendered by her own disappointments in love and by her take on how male privilege ironically depends on the will of women to perform daily domestic tasks -- cooking, cleaning, caring for children. Her depiction of men as the 'weaker' sex, both psychologically and morally, when seen in conjunction with a positive representation of female heroic characters -- women normally marginalised within contemporary fiction -- left Pym open to allegations of misandry. When a BBC researcher advised Pym of this, explaining that her "treatment of men characters suggested that [she] had a low opinion of the sex" -- Pym was caught off guard and responded defensively:

My instinctive reply sprang to my lips 'Oh, but I *love* men', but luckily I realized how ridiculous it would sound so said something feeble, but I can't remember what. They are going to invite me to a preview which will reveal the worst. (VPE, 423)²¹

On another occasion she defended herself in writing:

after *Jane and Prudence* somebody said to me 'You don't think much of men, do you?', but that isn't my attitude at all. To quote a joke phrase, some of my best friends are -- have been -- men! Certainly I've observed and studied men and their behaviour very closely, perhaps because I used to work with anthropologists and so got used to analysing people's behaviour.²²

But Pym's joke response is, in reality, a standard cover for expressing prejudice. She may have felt that she was able to translate her 'love' of men into an overtly humorous and only mildly critical depiction of them in her novels, but, seriously speaking, Pym's men seem pathologically weak, offering very little with which her women can engage.

²⁰ MS PYM 45, folio 23 verso.

²¹ The researcher was Jennifer McKay and the interview was in conjunction with the filming of *Tea with Miss Pym*, for the BBC2 *Book Programme*.

²² MS PYM 98, folio 32 recto.

Aware that some critics considered Pym's treatment of men denigratory, Larkin felt compelled to write in the *Times Literary Supplement*, "Miss Pym's novels may look like 'women's books', but no man can read them and ever be the same again".²³ It is certainly true that the novels look physically like women's books for they have always been marketed in this way, first by Jonathan Cape in the 1950s, and later by Macmillan and Collins, whose paperback covers bear a decidedly romantic imprint. These are finished in pastels, featuring photographs of feminine iconography -- flowers, feathers, and butterflies -- or artwork depicting domestic gentility, like a vase of lilies set among teacups on a table. But while Larkin suggests that the novels look like women's books, he may also mean that they initially read like them, too, as they offer insights into the domestic lives of women, revealing their concerns about love, relationships between the sexes, and matters pertaining to the private sphere, women's traditional domain. Larkin admired this domesticity and once wrote that he found in the novels "a continual perceptive attention to detail which is a joy, and a steady background of rueful yet courageous acceptance of things which I think more relevant to life as most of us have to live it than spies coming in from the cold".²⁴

Clearly Larkin himself was able to navigate a path through Pym's explicitly feminine landscape and felt that other men would too. He revelled within the confines of the novels' narrow borders, locating within Pym's world a certain universality to the human condition which spurred him to advocate for critical acceptance on her behalf.

²³ Larkin, "The World of Barbara Pym", 260.

²⁴ Thwaite, 376.

In a letter to his editor in which he tried to convince his publishers, Faber, to take Pym on to their publishing list, Larkin wrote

I feel it is a great shame if ordinary sane novels about ordinary sane people doing ordinary sane things can't find a publisher these days [...] I like to read about people who have done nothing spectacular, who aren't beautiful or lucky, who try to behave well in the limited field of activity they command, but who can see, in little autumnal moments of vision, that the so-called 'big' experiences of life are going to miss them; and I like to read about such things presented not with self pity or despair or romanticism, but with realistic firmness & even humour, that is in fact what the critics wd call the moral tone of the book.²⁵

While he may be right to label Pym's novels sane and ordinary, Larkin's generalisations, his use of the collective noun 'people' in describing the lives of Pym's characters, glosses the fact that men and women in her novels are served quite different lots in life, and even seem, at times, to be divergent species inhabiting separate worlds. Though Pym's women are not beautiful or lucky and do try to behave well in the limited field of activity in which they operate, this is not always the case with her men. On the whole (and this is certainly applicable to the Pymian heroes with whom Larkin was familiar prior to Pym's 'renaissance'), these men *are* good-looking, lucky enough to have women catering to their every need, and occasionally misbehave despite occupying a position of cultural privilege, revealing public personas that alternate between wilful insistence, childish petulance, and myopic insensitivity. As previously discussed, it is Pym's heroines who experience the 'autumnal moments of vision', as Larkin poetically puts it, since it is their self-awareness that expands to plot the boundaries of their parochial lives, while her men "exercise their imagination only upon themselves".²⁶

²⁵ Thwaite, 375-6.

²⁶ Jill Rubinstein, "'For the Ovaltine has loosened her tongue': Failures of Speech in Barbara Pym's *Less Than Angels*", *Modern Fiction Studies* 1986 32(4) Winter: 573.

This is not to suggest that Larkin was wrong to encourage an incipient male readership for Pym, nor that he necessarily hyperbolised when contending that men's lives may change irrevocably for having read her novels, but simply that an unclouded view of the condition of Pym's characters, particularly of her women, is facilitated by an understanding of how difference and alterity constitute the focus of her conception of gendered subjectivity. Pym's texts chronicle lives lived on either side of the 'gap', where women defer their desires and men find theirs fulfilled. And having learned how to cope with this social imbalance without resorting to any easy man-baiting -- which would indicate a political posturing Pym would have been loathe to assume publicly -- she cultivates the detachment of the anthropologist in detailing the often perplexing, paradoxically atavistic-yet-childish conduct of men while recording the equally curious behaviour of the women who doggedly serve them. Pym turns her ironic gaze on these men and on myths of male superiority, giving her heroines the agency to set the moral tone in the novels at the expense of a unified male ego.

Part of Pym's practical subversion can be found in gender inversion. A number of critics, particularly those most concerned with the relationship between the sexes in her novels, have noted Pym's transposition of certain issues relating to gender roles. Robert Emmet Long notes how Pym's novels "reverse the usual courtship procedure, for rather than a man's pursuing a woman, the women all cater to and court a handsome, vain man"²⁷, while Barbara Brothers contends that in these novels, "men -- not women -- are objectified and become the 'other', the great enigma".²⁸ Yet

²⁷ Long, 209.

²⁸ Brothers, "Love, Marriage and Manners in the Novels of Barbara Pym", 165.

another concludes that Pym's female-dominated communities, which "swarm with spinsters", resemble "the Amazonian society of *Cranford* [as] so little impact do men appear to have".²⁹ In the novels, it is women who 'hunt' for food and men, and "the changed position of the sexes" means that "women [are] more likely to go off to Africa to shoot lions" -- even 'lions above the bird' -- "as a cure for unrequited love than in the old days, when this had been a man's privilege" (*LA*: 70).

Hunter-man -- Child-man -- Queer

One of the perquisites of male privilege decrees that men eat first and best, and that the food they eat is prepared through the efforts of cultural subordinates. Although food may seem an unfettered biological *qua* nutritional necessity, anthropologists place eating within a complex web of power relations. Those who eat exert power over the eaten, just as those who eat without having to prepare food find favour within this matrix. Mervyn Nicholson calls this a pyramidal system, similar to the 'food chain' illustrated by zoologists, and notes how

[t]he more powerful eat the less, who eat less powerful again, and so on down to creatures like algae and worms. Human society has a parallel paradigm; the powerful rise by consuming/controlling those below them, competition being, in practice, taking advantage of others' weaknesses.³⁰

The parallel paradigm to which Nicholson alludes is essentially patriarchal as a gender binary also informs this pyramidal structure. The 'powerful who rise by consuming/controlling' the weak figure within the pyramid, as in a gender dichotomy, as 'dominant', 'superior', and 'male', while those low on the pyramidal structure do so as

²⁹ Margaret J.M. Ezell, "'What Shall We Do With Our Old Maids?': Barbara Pym and the 'Woman Question'", *International Journal of Women's Studies* Nov-Dec 1984 7(5): 456.

³⁰ Nicholson, 201.

'subordinate', 'inferior', and 'female'. In following the path of this binary logic we see that 'predator', too, figures as male, commensurate with the fact that hunting is literally as well as metaphorically linked with patriarchy and masculinity, while the predatory male's natural 'prey' figures as 'female'. Nicholson accounts for this representational difference by noting that "[p]ower-holders instinctively choose predatory animals for emblems, just as they have preferred 'blood' sports. Eagles live off lesser animals: power-holders prey upon less powerful in the hierarchy".³¹

It follows that an analysis of the role of men within the scene of eating must consider how these power-holders invest heavily in an economy of metonymy for, as Nicholson characterises it, "the relations of eating are metonymic for relations of social power".³² Within Pym's texts, female appetite may be linked to feminine desire and the female scene of eating operates as the metonymic site of that desire. In contrast, the male scene of eating operates as the metonymic site of power. Food consumption for men, by dint of their status as power-holders, presupposes the exercise of force or control over others. Eating may be seen as the realisation or fulfilment of that right of power. Furthermore, no single item of food plays a greater role in the power dynamic operative within the scene of eating than meat. The consumption of meat (to re-apply Cixous' phrase) *always already* involves the death of an animal, and the killing and consumption of animals is the ultimate assertion of power. Carol Adams states categorically that "men need meat"³³, echoing the mantra

³¹ Nicholson, 201.

³² Nicholson, 198.

³³ Adams, 28.

pronounced by various of the 'gatekeepers of consumption' in *Jane and Prudence*.

Men need meat, of course, because it is requisite to the diet of 'hunters'.

Pym enjoys playing with the figure of the hunter-man (a hunter, ostensibly, of both food and women) because he combines cultural-mythical overtones with the anthropological material she favours. She often alludes to quasi-predatory traits in her heroes, as in the case of Fabian, whom she describes as a "lion above the bird" (*JP*: 21), and whose leonine characteristics are marked by his "curly hair worn rather too long and touched with grey at the temples" (*JP*: 32). While his name conjures images of lions and eagles for Jane (*JP*: 29), his carnivorous appetite causes her to wonder, "Did he eat his victims, then?" (*JP*: 35), when she learns that he will eat a casserole of hearts for lunch that day. But Fabian's 'ladykiller' exterior belies a certain powerlessness and he falls prey to Jessie, who hunts him down and captures him despite competition from Prudence. Aylwin, too, who sports a "blond, leonine head" (*NFRL*: 16), is a hunter who finds himself the object of a hunt. First, Viola chases him, following Aylwin to the conference where Dulcie sees him, and then Dulcie pursues him, using her sleuthing abilities to track down his family in Tavistock. Having discovered that Aylwin does not like tomatoes, Dulcie amuses herself by calling them 'love apples' and "saying over the phrase, 'Aylwin can't take love apples' with a good deal of enjoyment" (*NFRL*: 116). Though innocent enough, this act is interesting for the way in which it portrays Dulcie's 'consumption' of Aylwin, within the context of a subliminally erotic fantasy, before she has even come to know him

well. Furthermore, Dulcie's is a deflationary script, for not being able to 'take' love apples effectively removes the lion's power and makes Aylwin's tastes seem childish.

What Dulcie does on a little scale Pym often does on a much grander one: she presents the hunter-man in a way that defuses his threat of physical and sexual power. Paul Shepard claims that the hunter, like other carnivores, manifests the potential to confuse "the two kinds of veneral aggression, loving and hunting"³⁴, but as Pym's men almost singularly lack the sort of aggression to which Shepard refers, their food hunting forays, like their transactions with women, lean toward the prosaic rather than the passionate. For Mark Ainger, commissioned to procure fish for dinner, the prosaic verges on the pathetic:

Only plaice was familiar to him, so he supposed it had better be that. Plaice, then, and two helpings -- better make it three if Faustina [the cat] was to be included -- perhaps 'portions' was the word -- and some chips. He must get this right, not make a fool of himself by stumbling over the words, not using the correct terminology or not knowing which fish he wanted [...] Mark lifted up his zip-fastened bag and the fragrant, greasy, newspaper-wrapped bundle was placed carefully inside it. Good-nights were exchanged and he left the shop with a feeling of satisfaction, as if a rather difficult task had been successfully accomplished. (UA: 15-6)

Though on the hunt for food, Mark is the antithesis of a hunter. He succeeds in an undeniably simple undertaking while his satisfaction in accomplishing this 'difficult' task is clearly disproportionate to its degree of difficulty; he behaves as though he has caught the fish himself. His hunt is initialised by a measure of uncertainty and equivocation, a fear of stumbling over words and seeming unknowledgeable, characterised by his fragmented, hyphenated train of thought.³⁵ He does not even

³⁴ Shepard, 172; according to the *OED*, "veneral", from *venery*, means 'sexual indulgence' and 'hunting'.

³⁵ Clearly, there are issues of class at play here as well. Mark's lack of familiarity with the language of the fish shop indicates his ignorance of lower class foodways,

come into contact with the 'kill' but has the fish placed directly into his bag. Such hesitation and deference reveals a softness in Mark that society more readily attributes to women, the non-predators, those conventionally deemed socially subordinate. But Mark's hesitation, like Fabian's subjugation at the hands of Jessie, follows a pattern of gender subjectivity in Pym's texts, where men are uncertain and women prove sharp.

In reality, though, Pym's 'sharp' women pose little threat to her men as each recognises that, at heart, the men are like children in need of nurturing and indulgence. Even the hunter-man displays a childish reliance on the women in his life, thus indicating that patterns of male behaviour in Pym's novels are loosely assigned. A number of the men cultivate relationships with women, especially the gatekeepers, that can be viewed through a Freudian filter. These men appear to be caught within an infant-mother nexus, orally-fixated, driven by a principle of pleasure, where their interests rest upon "the terms of the satisfaction or otherwise of [their] needs".³⁶ As Sanford Radner posits, "as [Pym's] adult men and women come together in the rituals of contemporary life [...] they unconsciously play out one key fantasy: *a self-denying mother generously feeds her ungrateful baby son*".³⁷ The relationship between the sexes, then, as manifest through the figure of the child-man, also involves the issue of 'changed positions', as seen in women's experience with the hunter-man. With the child-man, women exert control and influence but the gender power differential

and yet his very presence in the shop establishes his own low status. Furthermore, the fact that he hunts for the cat, too, places him lower on the pyramid.

³⁶ Mitchell, 13.

³⁷ Sanford Radner, "Barbara Pym's People", *Western Humanities Review* 1985 Spring 39(7): 172.

remains unchanged, as men benefit by having their demands met and their needs catered to while offering little in return.

In the novels, there are often markers, seemingly insignificant patterns of behaviour, that indicate a man's immaturity or childishness. Such behaviour highlights either his unsuitability as a potential love interest or the presence of even more sinister pathologies. For Gary Carter, it is a glass of milk; Caroline records how "he went into the kitchen and came out with a glass of milk and I made a mental note that he was that kind of person" (*AQ*: 124). As Margaret Visser notes, "[m]ilk [...] is easily perceived as 'female' and not, therefore, a promotor of male sexual urges"³⁸, which suggests, perhaps, that Gary is not entirely suitable as a partner for Caroline's sister, Susan. For Edwin, it is his penchant for biting the heads off black jelly babies: "The devouring of the jelly baby formed the last course of his midday meal which he usually ate at his desk among papers and index cards" (*QA*: 8). Though the narrator assures readers that "there was nothing racist about his action or his choice", the act does seem almost childishly malicious. And for Bertram, it is 'boiled baby', the term he uses to describe a dish of mince with tomato sauce spread over the top (*NFRL*: 99). Hermione scolds him, "I should have thought that young men training to be school-masters would have been above such puerile jokes", but Bertram remains nonplussed. He, after all, plans to enter a monk's guest house: "good food, central heating, no women" (*NFRL*: 98), effectively enumerating his own social deficiencies.

³⁸ Visser, *Much Depends on Dinner*, 197.

James provides another example of a child-man as central male character, in addition to Nicholas Cleveland, whose role as the nurtured and indulged proves to be key to the structure of the novel in which he features. Being considerably younger than Leonora, there is perhaps a greater potential for a mother-infant dynamic to develop, despite the undercurrent of sexual attraction that emanates from Leonora. She feels sorry for James, "[t]hat poor boy", upon hearing about his orphaned childhood, but recognises how difficult the situation could be for her if James' mother had not died. Unconsciously feeling that James needs a mother figure, Leonora sets out to woo him with food, feeding him asparagus on one occasion, causing him to exclaim in a childish manner so that Leonora urges him to make a wish -- "*A secret wish of course, darling*", [she] reassured him" (*SDD*: 46). But eventually Leonora's oppressive interest in him gradually leads James to respond through abjection; he feels overwhelmed, experiences a loss of power and identity, and is compelled to withdraw. His reaction to the vases that she gives him on his birthday prefaces his abjection:

For now that he saw the vases again he felt that perhaps after all he didn't like them as much as he had remembered. There was something sickly in their colouring and over-elaborate in their design. Looking at them he felt like somebody -- a child, of course -- who has eaten too many cream cakes or whatever would be the equivalent nowadays. Saddened, he sat down at the table and prepared to enjoy his delicious birthday dinner (*SDD*: 122)

Furthermore, the delicious food Leonora presents to James serves as a metonym of his captivity and only compounds his depression. Finally, in breaking free of Leonora, James' abject response allows him to revolt against the maternal, to release the hold of the maternal entity.³⁹

³⁹ Unfortunately for James, he effects his maternal revolt through a dependency on Ned, a subliminally dangerous character. Ned soon drops him and Leonora will not take him back, so the child-man James is effectively orphaned a second time.

Though James is homosexual, he does not fit the Pymian 'queer' pattern. These men are invariably comic characters, usually expert cooks who display an attitude of extreme fussiness towards food. Mildred admits that William Caldicote's "care for his food and drink [...] was something I accepted and even found rather endearing, especially as I benefited myself" (*EW*: 64). Once when they dine together, William is in a particularly fussy mood:

he went rather petulantly through the menu. The liver would probably be over-done, the duck not done enough, the weather had been too mild for the celery to be good -- it seemed as if there was really nothing we could eat. (*EW*: 64-5)

What Mildred finds endearing other characters find aggravating, for often the queer's boldness leads him to express himself in ways that Pym's self-effacing heroines would not. Mervyn, for example, cattily tells Ianthe that she has put on weight after her holiday in Rome ("It must be the pasta you've eaten -- all that cannelloni" [*UA*: 197]). He also reveals an impulsive nature only rarely exhibited by the Pym heroine (Mildred's did once buy lipstick called 'Hawaiian Fire'), buying six pomegranates on the way home from work, a purchase that must be read as a sign of his repressed desire, quashed through living with a tyrannical old woman. "We didn't know what to do with them. Of course Mother doesn't like anything with seeds, or anything foreign, come to that. She doesn't really like fruit at all" (*UA*: 106). Wilf Bason, however, seems a more liberated character, expressing himself artistically through cooking. Declaring that his "talents -- such as they are -- are rather out of the ordinary", he urges Wilmet to try some of his sponge: "I think you will find it very light" (*GB*: 111). Wilf places himself in competition with other cooks, especially women, confident that his skills should serve a man of taste like Father Bode, while allowing that Mrs Greenhill's inferior skills were equal to serving the more common Father Bode.

Adam Prince is the ultimate 'queer' character, the embodiment of behaviour associated with his type: he is an epicurean, a cultural conscience decrying the degradation of quality in material life in contemporary society, and a sensualist who unabashedly expresses his desire through food. Working as a food inspector, Adam attends the doctor's surgery, complaining of "worry, tension, [and] stress", and

the unreasonable fury he felt at seeing a bottle of wine being warmed up ('chambréed') on a storage heater, or being offered vinegary bottled mayonnaise instead of home-made, or sliced bread or processed cheese, or there being no Dijon mustard available when asked for, or freshly ground coffee, and finally, the use of tea-bags -- that seemed to upset him quite unreasonably (*FGL*: 185)

The doctor sees Adam as "fat and sleek as a well-living neutered cat" (*FGL*: 184), and uses the word "unnatural" to describe his occupation, echoing Tom, who feels ill at ease with Adam and finds his "appreciation of gourmet eating [...] inappropriate" (*FGL*: 29).

'It doesn't matter all that much what one drinks with *spaghetti* so I shall surprise myself. I shall go to my cellar and shut my eyes and reach out to touch a bottle and then, ah then, who knows *what* it might be!' Adam's small pale eyes, like sea-washed pebbles, gleamed, and his soft plump body seemed to swell in anticipation. (*FGL*: 30)

It goes without saying that men in Pym's novels do maintain a certain privilege, always benefiting from a woman's food hunting 'forays', while the negative pay-off entails that they feature as 'prey' in a woman's hunt for love. It may be thought that this reversed arrangement places Pym's women, as the true 'hunters', at the top of the pyramidal food structure but such is not the case. Pym's men may lack the authority and virility of real power-holders, but as her women almost universally endorse myths of male superiority (although, as we have seen, a number of heroines, including Jane and Catherine, mutely question the validity of them, mystified by the

impact such myths have on the class of women), they overtly and covertly re-construct images of the men in their lives, determined to imagine men worthy of their love and devotion. The re-construction works so effectively, however, that the perception among characters in the novels demands that women must work to earn a man's admiration and love.

Conclusion: Disentangling the Meat from Bones

In a working notebook from 1955, Pym includes an entry -- possibly an idea for a novel, though it never featured in one -- offering a curiously detached view of eating:

the boredom of eating sometimes -- disentangling the meat from bones, dissecting the fillet of plaice, the confusion of small bones -- apathy -- then the taste of chips, sharp and hard. The avoided ones.¹

Though this entry could easily be overlooked, it is, in reality, quite significant for a number of reasons. For one who enjoyed her food as much as Pym did, it is worthy of note when she records an instance of food consumption that appears to be bereft of any pleasure. The scene registers, as well, for its lack of an apparent referent in terms of person, place, or time, and for the manner in which it describes the process of eating from an almost purely mechanical perspective. There is virtually no emotion here and little sensation. This Pymian scene of eating figures as both a depersonalised and defamiliarised one, calling to mind the process of abjection, a place where the human and animal meet, where ambiguity resides and where desire is sublimated.

Despite its strangeness, however, this entry -- quietly tucked away in a notebook among the Pym archives -- perfectly captures the writer's narrative voice. Pym's characteristic eye for detail is here, alongside her concern for the mundane and the trivial. Perhaps even more importantly, there are echoes of gender, anthropology, and literature here, too. Indeed, this brief entry resonates in so many ways that it can serve as a metaphor for the author's examination of food and gender, as well as for her philosophy of writing. Furthermore, the entry serves as a metaphor for the

¹ MS PYM 46, folio 29 verso-30 recto.

interests of this study of Pym, which has sought to disentangle the meat from the bones of her texts, concerned as it is with Pym's treatment of food and gender, desire and its deferral, the trivial and the ordinary, and observation and fictionalisation. This act of 'disentangling the meat from bones' speaks directly to the essence of this work.

Based on this study's reading, for example, of the intersection of food and gender in Pym's writing, this particular scene of eating appears feminised, despite the absence of any gendered clue which would indicate the sex of the consumer. But when one considers the manner in which Pym contrasts meals eaten by men and women in her novels, however, it becomes easier to imagine that it is a woman who perseveres with disentangling the meat from bones -- Pym's women being more likely "to take trouble with [...] difficult things, whereas men would hardly think it worth while" (*GB*: 14). And while men eat alone "in a rather grand club with noble portals" (as noted in the Introduction), women eat alone "in a small, rather grimy restaurant" (*JP*: 44-45). Indeed, in Pymian terms, there is always something slightly august about a man's meal, even when it appears truly miserable (as Jane imagines Fabian's efforts at preparing a meal for himself): "just beer and bread and cheese, a man's meal and the better for being eaten alone" (*JP*: 35).² By comparison, the only noble aspect to a lone meal consumed by Mildred is that she attends to it without complaint:

I went up to my flat to eat a melancholy lunch. A dried-up scrap of cheese, a few lettuce-leaves for which I could not be bothered to make any dressing, a tomato and a piece of bread-and-butter, followed by a cup of coffee made with coffee essence. A real *woman's* meal, I thought [...] (*EW*: 162)

² Fabian leads Jane to believe that, as a widower, he cooks for and looks after himself, but it turns out that Mrs Arkwright 'does' for him. On this particular occasion, he is not returning home to a meal of beer, bread and cheese, but to a casserole of hearts.

The apathetic consumption of plaice and chips as recorded in the working notebook entry could qualify as a real woman's meal, too, mainly because this food combination manifests strong ties to an under-class. Though men in the novels are seen to eat fish and chips occasionally (Jessie indulges Fabian's baser desires by taking him out for some), because Pym uses the scene of eating to contrast feminine poverty with masculine wealth, Spartan meals are gendered feminine almost by default. One can imagine, then, in a Pymian context, that a consumer who pauses to consider 'the boredom of eating', who objectively records the effort required to extract meat from bones, and who perseveres with this disordered meal, must be a woman.

References to boredom, confusion, apathy, and avoidance, and the use of a clinical term like dissection, also indicate that the forces of abjection are in operation here. This study contends that Pym qualifies as a writer of the abject; this entry, with its 'confusion of small bones', effectively serves as an anatomy of abjection. In this narrative fragment, Pym's unknown consumer describes eating not with a mind to its purpose or pleasure, but sees in it instead a blurring of distinctions between Culture and Nature. Here, language shifts between *ennui* and clinical detachment, between atavistic determination and a semi-articulated notion of distaste and rejection. Furthermore, meat's absent referent is nearly replaced, so that the meal appears almost like the serving up of a corpse, the skeletal remains exposed to pathological scrutiny. In this way, the human meal resembles an animal meal, which is a conceit that Pym often plays with. In a diary entry from January 1950, when Pym was staying at Broomhall Lodge with friends, she records how "[t]he distinction between animals'

and human's dishes is a very narrow one. One feels that when we aren't there, there is *no distinction*" (VPE: 262). This defamiliarised view of eating may lead us to reconsider the effects of an act often conducted unconsciously, and to re-evaluate that which we allow to broach the sanctity of our bodily boundaries. More significantly, this abject response to food arises from a classic confrontation within the gender dynamic: discord between the 'Self' and the 'Other', between desire and its deferral.

Clearly, Pym's novels are built upon gender conflict -- Penelope Lively corroborates this unhesitatingly: "all Barbara Pym's novels are about the war of genders (not the sex war, which is something rather different) first and foremost, long before they are (as most critics have claimed) about social nuances".³ Pym's early writing influences were based on perceptions of others' treatment of this very subject. For example, in the radio talk, "Finding a Voice", wherein Pym attempts to document the development of her prose style, she admits that the works of 'Elizabeth', author of *Elizabeth and her German Garden*, "were a revelation in their wit and delicate irony, and the dry, unsentimental treatment of the relationships between men and women which touched some echoing chord in me at that time" (CS: 410). In fine-tuning her own treatment of the relationships between men and women, Pym uses food to mark gender difference, to delineate gender hierarchy, and to analogise desire when these differences make communication (and, ultimately, communion) impossible. In exploring how gender mechanisms work in her novels, she portrays the different ways men and women are fed as the respectively dominant and subordinate members of a

³ Lively, "Recent Fiction", 76.

patriarchal society, with women coming up short on most occasions. Though they may prepare the meals enjoyed by others, metaphorically speaking Pym's women are left to eat the "chips, sharp and hard".

Pym's anthropological bent definitely broadened and deepened her ability to treat food and gender issues. Echoes of an anthropologist's insight resonate even in the brief working notebook entry: in the minutely-observed detail, the critical detachment, and the clinical language ('dissecting the fillet of plaice'). Indeed, it could be argued that her association with the field of anthropology informed both content and form in her writing (according to Hazel Holt, Pym "always said that she was glad that she could never be a 'full-time novelist' and that she had to earn her living some other way" [VPE: 258]), enriching, in particular, her texts' comedic possibilities.

Taking a moment to disentangle this (funny) 'bone', we see how Everard Bone's name combines anthropological undertones (he *is* what he studies) with sexual ones ('ever-hard bone') which heightens the tension in the food/gender dynamic when Mildred agonises about 'cooking his meat'. The comic definition of anthropology, 'the study of man embracing woman', which so amused Pym, works its way into *Less Than Angels* (the most anthropological of her novels) when Bernard's hand strays too far down

Deirdre's shoulder:

But suddenly it stopped and withdrew quickly as if it had touched an asp or a scorpion. He must have come upon the bone of her strapless bodice which made her such an odd shape. He would hardly have expected to find a bone *there*, she thought, stifling her laughter.

'I'm not really that shape you know', she said suddenly in a gay tone. 'It must feel like a chicken's carcass -- so unexpected!'

Bernard was perhaps a little embarrassed for he had no ready answer, so she went on in the same uncharacteristic way: 'A chicken's carcass is all hollow inside and domed like the roof of a cathedral, so noble!' (LA: 52)

Pymian gender battles are rarely more serious than this, where communication is hampered by a certain incomprehensibility as these two 'tribes', women and men, try to achieve some mutual understanding; Pym's anthropological insight, particularly of the *culinary* sort, supplies an ideal medium to explore gender-tribal conflict.

In the final analysis, however, Pym was not an anthropologist but a novelist -- though her fiction plays upon the notion of similarities between these two vocations. Everard Bone once compared the work of the novelist to that of the anthropologist: "'Haven't the novelist and the anthropologist more in common than some people think?' said Everard. 'After all, both study life in communities, though the novelist need not be so accurate or bother with statistics and kinship tables'" (*UA*: 126). This sentiment echoes one often espoused by Pym, who said that anthropologists' "work often showed many of the qualities that make a novelist -- accurate observation, detachment, even sympathy. It only needed a little more imagination, plus the leavening of irony and humour, to turn their accounts into novels".⁴ We see this accurate observation and detachment in her recording of the boredom of eating; what is missing, of course, is a fuller imaginative context.⁵ But what connects the practice of anthropologists and novelists even more, by Pym's reckoning, is their analogous relationship to the art of cooking. Again, Everard confesses how his wife (the former Mildred Lathbury) "says that we anthropologists are like a housewife faced with the remains of yesterday's stew and wondering whether it can possibly be eked out to

⁴ Barbara Pym, "In defence of the novel", *The Times*, February 22, 1978: 18.

⁵ The entry appears in a working notebook featuring a number of references to what would become the novel *A Glass of Blessings*, so it might have been recorded with the character of Wilmet in mind.

make another meal" (*UA*: 126). Pym herself claimed that in concocting her "literary soup" she "did not need cream and eggs and raw shell fish, but just this old cod's head, the discarded outer leaves of a cabbage, water and seasoning".⁶ These examples aptly represent the politics of the Pymian meal *and* the ethos of her literary impetus: the ordinary and the familiar re-presented through judicious alteration. Put another way, Pym -- like Catherine Oliphant -- draws "her [literary] inspiration from everyday life, though life itself was sometimes too strong and raw and must be made palatable by fancy, as tough meat may be made tender by mincing" (*LA*: 7).

So all these ingredients comprise the (literary soup) 'bones' of Pym's fiction -- the dishing up of the trivial with an undertaste of the abject, the admixture of some anthropological intertext, and a leavening of humour and irony. The real 'meat' of her texts, however, lies in the relationship between the sexes, where raw gender issues are tenderised through the agency of the literary imagination. And though some might not find this treatment tender enough -- Pym wonders "why is that men find my books so sad? Women don't particularly", before answering herself, "[p]erhaps they (men) have a slight guilt feeling that this is what they do to us, and yet really it isn't as bad as all that" (*VPE*: 311) -- Pym's nascent feminism lends her a rare degree of generosity, one that celebrates that the old woman with "her hairy chin and general air of greyness [...] was as much a woman as a glamorous perfumed model" (*VPE*: 427), and permits the drab Jessie Morrow a brief moment of glory to declare, "Women are very powerful -- perhaps they are always triumphant in the end" (*JP*: 125).

⁶ MS PYM 56, folio 3 recto-verso.

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